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**Adventure in Worlds of Tomorrow**

# **No Time Like the Future**

**NELSON BOND**



**Complete & Unabridged**



## **THE PROPHETS OF DESTINY**

So may we call the imaginative men who today, with swift, incisive pen strokes, delineate for us the vivid, almost real worlds of science fiction.

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They will transport you to far galaxies, to times before or after man, to the thoughts and deeds of a myriad of strange races—to worlds that may or may not ever come to be, but which live in these pages to prove there is **NO TIME LIKE THE FUTURE.**







# **No Time Like the Future**

**NELSON BOND**

**complete and unabridged**

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*Whom shall we send  
In search of this new world?  
Whom shall we find Sufficient?*  
Milton—Paradise Lost

## VITAL FACTOR

Wayne Crowder called himself a forceful man. Those who knew him best (none knew him really well) substituted adjectives somewhat flattering. He was, they said, a cold and ruthless man; a man of iron will and icy determination; a man with a heart to match his granite jaw. Not cunning, dishonest or unfair. Just hard. A man who wanted his own way—and got it.

In an era that sees more fortunes lost than gained, Crowder proved his ability and acumen by getting rich. Even in these days of exaggerated material and labor costs this can be done by a bold, determined man who admits no obstacles. Wayne Crowder did it. He patented a simple household product needed by everyone, sold it at a penny profit that crushed all would-be competition, and made himself a multi-millionaire despite the staggering levies of the Department of Internal Revenue. He built himself a towering structure and placed his private office at its peak. He dwelt in the clouds, both figuratively and literally. In sense and essence, those whom he employed were his underlings.

He was the ultimate model of the passionless man of business: self-centered, joyless, energetic, shrewd. Even those sleek, expensive periodicals which fawn on wealth

and adulate tycoons could find no warm, good things to write of Wayne Crowder. A man of ice and stone and ink and steel, they called him. And in the main, their judgment was correct.

But he surprised them.

One afternoon he said to his secretary, "Get me my engineers."

The engineers sat deferentially before his massive desk. Wayne Crowder told them crisply, "Gentlemen—I want you to build me a spaceship."

The engineers eyed him, and then each other, a bit apprehensively. Their spokesman cleared his throat.

"A spaceship, sir?"

"I have decided," said Crowder, "to be the man who gives spaceflight to mankind."

One of the experts said, "We can *design* you such a ship, sir. That part is not too hard. The fundamental blueprint has been in existence for many years; the submarine is its basis. But—"

"Yes?"

"But the motor that will power such a ship," said the engineer frankly, "we cannot provide. Men have searched for it for decades, but the answer is not yet found. In other words, we can build you a ship, but we can't lift that ship from Earth's surface."

"Design the ship," said Crowder, "and I will find the motor you need."

The chief engineer asked, "Where?"

Crowder answered, "A fair question. And my answer is: I do not know. But somewhere in this world is a man who *does* know the secret—and will reveal it if I provide the money to convert his theory to fact. I'll find that man."

"You'll be besieged by a mob of crackpots."

"I know it. You men must help me separate the wheat from the chaff. But anyone who shows up with a prom-

ising idea, however fantastic it may sound, shall have a chance to show what he can do."

"You mean you'll subsidize their experiments? It will cost a fortune!"

"I have a fortune," said Crowder succinctly. "Now get to work. Build me the ship, and I will make it fly."

Wayne Crowder summoned the newsmen. Their stories were spectacular, amusing, and more than a shade malicious. Press syndicates took jeering delight in offering the world the details of *Crowder's Folly*—the magnate's offer of one hundred thousand dollars in cold cash to the man who would make it possible for a vessel to rise from this planet. But the stories circulated to the distant corners of the globe; the offer was transmitted in a dozen tongues.

The prediction of the engineers was verified. The Crowder office building became a Mecca and a haven for the lunatic fringe of humanity; their blueprints and scale models clogged its corridors, their letters were an inky deluge that threatened to engulf the expanded staff of clerks employed to sort, examine, scrutinize each scheme. Crowder himself saw only those few who passed the winnowing screen of this corps. Most of these he eventually turned away, but some he placed on a retaining wage and set to work. He poured a prince's ransom into the construction of new laboratories. His wide proving-grounds became the bedlam workshop for upward of a score of would-be conquistadors of space.

The weeks rolled by; the spaceship designed by the engineers left the blueprint stage and went into construction. But still no subsidiee had made good his boast that his pet engine—of steam or explosive, gas or atomic or whatever fuel—would lift the metal monster from Earth's surface. Many tests were made. Some were comic, some tragic. But all were failures.

Still Crowder did not swerve from his obsession.

"He will come," he said. "Money and determination will buy anything. One day he will appear."

And he was right. One day there came to his office a stranger. He was a small man. He looked even smaller in that tremendous room, dwarfed in the yielding depths of a capacious chair, his eyes on the level of Crowder's massive desk. He was an unusual visitor in that he carried no briefcase fat with blueprints, schematics, or formulae. He was unusual in that he neither blustered, cowered nor deferred to his host. He was a pleasant little stranger, birdlike of eye and movement, bright and smiling.

He said, "My name is Wilkins. I can power the ship you want."

"So?" said Crowder.

"But it will be unlike that meaningless huge bullet your engineers are building. Rockets are a foolish waste of time. My motor requires a different sort of vessel."

"Where are your plans?" asked Crowder.

"Here," said the little man, and tapped his head.

Crowder said impassively, "I am supporting a score of others who claim the same. None has been successful. What makes you think your idea will work?"

"The flying disks," replied the little man.

"Eh?"

"I've solved their secret. My idea is based on the principle that lets them fly. Electromagnetism. Utilization of the force of gravity. Or its opposite: counter-gravity."

"Thank you very much," said Crowder, rising. "Now if you'll excuse me—"

"Wait!" bade the little man. "There is one thing more. There is *this*."

He drew from his pocket a metal object the size and shape of an ashtray. He suspended it over Crowder's desk—and took his hand away. It hung there in midair. Crowder touched it. A gentle tingling stirred his finger-



tips, but the object did not fall. Crowder sat down again slowly.

"Enough," he said. "What do you want?"

"For my services," said Wilkins, "you have already set a fair price. Three other things. A workshop in which to build a pilot model based on this sample. Expert mechanical assistance. And an answer."

Crowder's brows lifted. "An answer?"

"An answer to one question. Why do you want so much to build this ship?"

"Because," said Crowder frankly, "I love power. Because I am ambitious. I would be the first to conquer space because to do so will make me greater, richer, stronger, than any other man. I would be the master, not merely of one world, but of worlds."

"An honest answer," said Wilkins, "if a strange one."

"What other could there be?"

"There could be mine," said the little man thoughtfully. "I would leave this planet and go elsewhere—to Mars, perhaps—because there are strange beauties yet to find. Because there will be scarlet sunsets over barren wastes, and in the star-strewn night the thin, cold air of a dying world stirring in restless sighs across the valleys of the dry canals. Because from here its bright, far gleaming in the sky is a ruby pain and aching in my heart, and my soul yearns with a longing to set foot on another world as yet untrod by man."

Crowder said brusquely, "You are a sentimentalist. I am a man of logic. No matter. We can work together, you and I. Your workshop will be ready in the morning."

Four months later, in the smoky haze of an October sunset, the two men sat together again. But not this time in Crowder's tower office. This time they crouched within the cubicle of a small, disk-shaped machine made by Crowder's engineers on plans designed by Wilkins. Outside, great crowds were gathered to witness the test flight. They stirred and murmured, waiting restlessly,

as inside the control room of the craft Wilkins installed the final secret part he had not revealed to those who built his driving apparatus.

The little man secured a wire here, made a minute adjustment in another place. Crowder growled impatiently.

"Well, Wilkins? What's holding us up?"

"Nothing now." Wilkins laid down his tools, moved to the outer rim of the curiously shaped craft and raised a metal screen which allowed him to look out upon the proving-grounds. "Or—sentiment, perhaps. A wish to look once more on Earth's familiar scenes."

"You are a maudlin fool," sniffed Crowder, "or else you are afraid. Perhaps you have decided your invention won't work, after all?"

"It will work."

"Then turn on your motor. Let me hear its roar and feel the tug as we cut free of Earth's gravity and fly outward into space. Then maybe I will share your sentiment."

The little man lowered the port and moved back to the controls. He touched a lever and depressed a key. His hands moved dreamily across the board. Said Crowder fretfully, "I'm beginning to distrust you, Wilkins. If this is all a hoax— When are we going to take off? You said at five sharp, and it is now—" he glanced at his watch—"it is now five-oh-two. Well? Do we move, or don't we?"

"We are already moving," said Wilkins.

Once more he lifted the screen that covered the port. Crowder saw the purple-black of space, cream-splattered with myriad stars. Behind them receding Earth was a toy balloon . . . a dime . . . a firefly.

"By God!" cried Crowder, stumbling to his feet. "By God, you've done it, Wilkins!"

Wilkins smiled.

A great elation tore at Crowder's breast. He knew emotion at last, this cold, hard man. He cried tri-

umphantly, "Then I was right! There is nothing money and determination cannot buy. I swore to be the man to conquer space, and I've made good. It's a triumph of power and ambition."

"And sentiment," said Wilkins.

"Be damned! Your dreaming would have died a-borning but for me. I made this possible, Wilkins; don't ever forget that. My capital, my forcefulness, my will."

He stared at distant Earth through glowing eyes.

"This is but the beginning," he said. "We'll build a larger model. One great enough to hold a hundred men. We'll launch the first invasion of a world. I'll forge a new empire—on Mars. Turn back now, Wilkins."

"No," said Wilkins. "I think not."

"What? We've proven this ship can fly. Now we'll go back and prepare for greater flights."

"Not so," said the little man. "We will go on."

"What's this?" roared Crowder. "You defy me? Are you mad?"

"No," said Wilkins. "Sentimental."

He took off his coat. He took off his necktie and his shirt, slipped off his trousers and his shoes. Beneath his clothing shone another garb, a strange apparel totally unlike anything Crowder had ever seen before. A gleaming, tight-knit cloth of golden hue, curiously outlining the quite unhuman aspects of his small physique. He smiled at Crowder, and it was a friendly smile. But it was not the smile of a creature born on Earth.

"Your money and ambition paved the way," said the man from Mars, "but sentiment was the vital factor that sent me to you. You see—I wanted to go home."

## THE VOICE FROM THE CURIOUS CUBE

All Xuthil seethed with excitement. The broad highways, the swirling ramps that led to the public forum were thronged with the jostling bodies of a hundred thousand inhabitants, while in the living quarters of the capital city millions unable to witness the spectacle first-hand waited anxiously by their *menavisors* for news.

The curious cube had opened. The gigantic slab of marble, its sheer, glistening walls towering hundreds of feet above the head of the tallest Xuthilian, its great square base more than a hundred home-widths on each side, but a few hours ago had opened—one smoothly oiled block sliding backward to reveal a yawning pit of blackness in its depths.

Already a band of daring explorers, heavily armed, had penetrated the depths of the curious cube. Soon they would return to make a public report, and it was this which all Xuthil breathlessly awaited.

None living knew the purpose—or dared guess the fearful age—of the curious cube. The earliest archives in Xuthilian libraries noted its existence, presupposing divine origin or construction. For certainly even the accomplished hands of earth's dominant race could not have built so gigantic a structure. It was the work of Titans, or a god.

So, with *menavisors* dialed to the forum for the first mental images to be broadcast therefrom by members of the exploration party, Xuthil hummed with nervous activity.



Abruptly a pale green luminiscence flooded the reflector screens of the *menavisors*, and a thrill coursed through the viewers. The exploration party had returned. Tul, chief of all Xuthilian scientists, was stepping upon the circular dais, his broad, intelligent forehead furrowed with thought. His band of followers trailed after him. They too walked leadenly.

Tul stepped before the image-projecting unit. As he did so, a wavering scene began to impress itself into the minds of his watchers—a picture that grew more clear and distinct as the mental contact strengthened.

Each Xuthilian saw himself walking behind the glare of a strong torch down a long straight marble passageway, through a high vaulted corridor of seamless stone. Cobwebs and the dust of centuries stirred softly beneath his feet, and the air was musty with the scent of long-dead years. A torch swung toward the roof of the passageway, and its beam was lost in the vast reaches of the chamber above.

Then the passage widened into a great amphitheatre—a tremendous room that dwarfed to insignificance the wide Xuthilian forum. Telepathically each viewer saw himself—as Tul had done—press forward on eager feet, then stop and swing his flaring torch around the strangest sight a living eye had ever seen. Rows upon rows of recessed drawers, bronze-plated and embossed with heir-glyphs—these were the contents of the curious cube. These and nothing more.

The picture wavered, faded. The thoughts of Tul replaced it, communicating directly with each watcher.

“Undeniably there is some great mystery yet to be dissolved concerning the curious cube. What these drawers contain we do not know. Archives, perhaps, of some long-vanished race. But it will take long years of arduous labor with the finest of modern equipment to open even *one* of the mighty shelves. Their gigantic size and intricate construction defies us. If living creatures built the

curious cube—and we may suppose they did—their bodily structure was on a scale so vastly greater than our own that we are utterly unable to comprehend the purpose of their instruments. Only one thing found in the cube was in any way comparable to machinery we know and employ.”

Tul turned and nodded to two of his assistants. They moved forward, staggering under the weight of a huge stone slab, circular in form, set into a greater square of some strange fibroid material. Attached to this giant dais was a huge resilient hawser, larger in width by half than those who bore it.

“The cable attached to this slab,” continued Tul, “is very long. It reaches all the way into the heart of the curious cube. Obviously it has some bearing on the secret, but what that bearing is, we do not know. Our engineers will have to dismember the slab to solve its meaning. As you see, it is solid—”

Tul stepped upon the stone. . . .

And as Tul stepped upon the push-button, quiescent current flowed from reservoirs dormant for ages, and from the dark depths of the curious cube an electrically controlled recorder spoke.

“Men—” said a human voice— “men of the fiftieth century—we, your brothers of the twenty-fifth need you. For humanity’s sake, we call on you for help.

“As I speak, our solar system is plunging into a great chlorine cloud from which it will not emerge for hundreds of years. All mankind is doomed to destruction. In this specially constructed vault we have laid to rest ten thousand of the greatest minds of Earth, hermetically sealed to sleep in an induced catalepsy until the fiftieth century. By that time the danger will be ended.

“The door to our vault at last has opened. If there be men alive, and if the air be pure, pull down the lever beside the portal of our tomb and we will waken.

"If no man hear this plea—if no man still be alive—then farewell, world. The sleeping remnants of the race of man sleeps on forever."

"Solid," repeated Tul. "Yet, as you see, it seems to yield slightly." He continued dubiously, "Citizens of Xuthil, we are as baffled by this mystery as you are. But you may rest assured that your council of scientists will make every effort to solve it."

The green glare of the *menavisors* faded. Xuthil, perplexed and marveling, returned to its daily labors. On street corners and in halls, in homes and offices, Xuthilians briefly paused to touch antennae, discussing the strange wonder.

For the voice from the curious cube had not been heard by any living creature. Sole rulers of the fiftieth century were ants—and ants cannot hear.

## BUTTON, BUTTON

It would be better, he thought, if you didn't have to look at it. Easier if you could find something, *anything*, to occupy your hands. But all the instruments—except that one, of course—were completely automatic. Smoking was forbidden in all compartments save the recreation sector. And one grew weary, finally, of solitaire. Then the oppressive restlessness crept in. You became increasingly aware of your aloneness; the tight, hard, gnawing circle of your own ideas; the tenseness and the gathering temptation.

Odd that temptation should be symbolized by a half-inch, half-ounce disc. Disturbing that hot impulse could be stirred by a cold, inanimate object. Incredible that torment could assume the image of a tiny crimson button.

Jeff Corcoran's hand reached forth and touched that button gingerly, tentatively, without pressure. It was smooth to his questing fingertips, smooth and cool and infinitely inviting. With an abrupt effort he withdrew his hand. His fingers raked the scattered cards before him and shuffled them with a furious intensity, doggedly spread them in the pattern of another of those interminable, diverting games of patience.

Twelve games and thirty fretful minutes later, Bob Craig appeared. He lounged across the Gunnery Post deftly, selecting handloops with the catlike grace of one who has almost forgotten how to move without such aids, his progress more a guided float than walking. He eased himself into the contour-chair beside Jeff, his eyes flick-



ering wry amusement at the cards fanned before the younger man.

"Gets a little dull at times, eh, Corcoran?"

Jeff said, "That observation, my friend, wins the Interplanetary Understatement Award for the Year 1981. That plaintive howling sound you hear in the distance is my personal meemies screaming for release."

Craig grinned.

"I know. Life on the Wheel gets pretty damned monotonous at times. But any routine job is tedious. If you want pure unadulterated boredom you should make the Venus run some time. Twenty-one weeks in a vacuum-jug, with nothing to look at but the ugly maps of a handful of companions you learn to detest wholeheartedly before the first month is over."

"That must be tiresome, it's true," conceded Jeff. "But not—" He stopped abruptly. Craig's brows queried him.

"Not what?"

"Nothing," said Jeff. "Just yakking. I guess I'm a little space-happy. Well . . . time to take over?"

"Almost."

The two men exchanged places. Craig glanced at the chronometer, flicked the switch of the tapetimer and reported on duty. "Eleven-fifty-nine Greenwich Mean Time. Lieutenant Craig relieving Ensign Corcoran at Gunnery Post. Over."

He sprawled back in the controlman's swivel chair, kicked off his grippers, lifted his feet to the instrument panel before him, and sighed.

"And so begins another exciting episode in the adventurous career of Bobby Craig, Boy Wheelman," he declaimed derisively. "Yesterday we left our hero battling the grim ogre, Morpheus, in whose arms he was as a helpless babe. To-day—"

Jeff said suddenly, "Craig—"

"Hmm?"

"This will probably sound silly, but—what do *you*

do when you're on watch here all alone for two solid hours?"

"Why," shrugged Craig, "what the regulations call for, of course. Check the instruments at fifteen minute intervals for ground zero location, trajectory and course deviation relative to the Bubble down there—" He tossed a casual thumb toward the viewpane through which the ball of Earth stood out against the spangled ebony of space like a gigantic mottled marble floating in a curd of cloud. "Maintain a record of all observations and audio pickups regarding meteorological phenomena, ionization shifts, or anything else that might affect ballistic computations . . . routine duties. What else is there to do?"

"That's just it," replied Jeff bitterly. "Nothing. Abysmally damned nothing! Well . . . see you later."

He slipped into his magnetic gripper boots, shuffled to his feet and reached for the first of the series of handloops that would assist him in his wallowing crawl from the rim of the Wheel to the recreation quarters nearer the hub. As he lurched away, Bob Craig was bending forward to scan the dials, jotting an observation entry in the log.

Jeff went first to the 'Fresher Room for a needed shower. In the bathbox, feathery plumes of water jetting from every pore of the enclosure whirled weightless about him in a dancing cloud. This was one of the good features, he decided, of living on an artificial satellite a thousand miles above Earth's surface. Droplets uninfluenced by gravity did not cascade upon him to be lost, but clung to him like mist beneath a fall. The water was cool and fresh and wonderful. After two minutes of its drenching spray he felt like a new man. He suction-cleared the bathbox, floated from it, slipped into cool space-briefs and went to the galley for a bite of lunch.

McWhorter, steward of the Wheel, provided him with

a cage of sandwiches, a ball of tea, and dour conversation.

"Hello, Mr. Corcoran. Anything new on the Pan-Am crisis?"

"Not that I know of," said Jeff. He washed down a bite of ham-and-cheese with a gulp of tea squeezed from the plastic sphere. "You heard anything?"

McWhorter shook his head.

"Nothing good. VanBrugh was in a while ago. He says the Feds are massing paratroops at every base in South America."

VanBrugh was Observations Officer. Jeff frowned.

"In spite of the U.N. warning?"

"Warning! Words don't frighten dictators. Remember Sixty-two? There was no stopping the Communists until the Nations finally got tough. Force is the only language warlords understand."

"Brute force never proved anything, Mac. The U.N. is wise to hold fire so long as there's any chance of reaching a peaceful settlement. In time—"

"Time's running out," grumbled the steward, "and while we dilly-dally the Feds are making every minute count. It won't be long before they bust loose. If I were you"—he nodded at the young officer grimly—"I'd be damn glad I had the power in my hand to do something about it."

"Then I'm glad you're not me," said Jeff. "We're not stationed here to take sides in international arguments, Mac. We act as a police force only in an emergency."

McWhorter looked faintly disgusted.

"I don't understand you, Ensign. It's your country they're making faces at. You're an American, aren't you?"

"I was born in the United States," acknowledged Jeff quietly. "I'm a Patrolman now. I shifted my first allegiance to mankind when I put on this uniform."

He touched the glittering insignia pinned to the breast

pocket of his blouse, the Wheel medallion with its proud inscription: *Mundo servire*.

"You know our motto, Mac. 'To serve the world.' That's the function of the Patrol. To serve the *world* . . . not any single nation or group of nations."

"Sure," said McWhorter impatiently. "So when one gang of hotheads threatens to disturb the peace of the world, you should *act*."

"When such a threat is proven," replied Jeff, "we *will* act—but on decisions calmly weighed and decided; not in hot haste or anger. We *serve* the world. We don't *rule* it."

In the Recreation Room the Pan-Am crisis was the dominant topic of conversation. Here, however, comment was more sober and restrained. The officers here gathered were Academy graduates trained to think in terms of world, not geographic, government. Two of the men, erstwhile citizens of the South American Federation, were greatly embarrassed and disturbed by the conflict brewing a thousand miles below.

Pedro Gonzales of the Argentine said, "I can't help thinking the reports must be exaggerated. It's not like my country to make such aggressive moves. Surely they should be able to solve their differences with the North American Alliance by some means short of war."

VanBrugh offered encouragingly, "I don't believe the squabble will come to anything. After all, there hasn't been a shooting war on Earth since the Wheel was built five years ago. And with good reason. No nation is powerful enough to defy a U.N. warning. They know we pass over and observe every inhabited corner of the globe once every twenty-four hours; what's more, that we dominate every portion, that our guns pinpoint any target we select. No nation would be fool enough to buck such odds."

Manuel daSilva said with gloomy dignity, "You don't

understand the temper of my people, Jan. Odds, danger, death, mean nothing to them when they are aroused. One or a dozen bombs would be lost in the Matto Grasso of my country alone—and we are but one unit of the Federation. A million, two million lives would be written off as expendable if the stakes were high enough.

“And don’t forget,” he added, “if *they* are vulnerable, so are *we*. Their long-range atomic cannon can reach us almost as certainly as we can strike at them. The Wheel is not too small an object to be hit. Last year’s war games proved that.”

Jeff Corcoran offered swiftly, “False reasoning, Mike. During the war games we were established as an invariable object moving in a regular orbit. Actually, we’re not. Ten minutes after the first aggressive shot is fired at us from Earth, the Wheel’s auxiliary rockets can change our height and speed, throw us into an incomputable eccentric orbit, and make us an almost impossible target.”

“True,” nodded daSilva. “But suppose we are hit *before* the orbit is shifted? Or even if we are not—how are you, a gunner, going to fire with any degree of accuracy from an erratic orbit? Had you thought of that?”

Jeff hadn’t. The mere idea was sobering. It was one thing to sit snugly in the Gunnery Post of an artificial satellite revolving bi-hourly in a predictable course around Earth at 1,075 miles elevation, moving at a constant 15,000 miles per hour, and on the basis of these known factors to calculate the ballistic formulae required to drop an atomic warhead on any given spot of Earth’s surface. It would be another thing entirely to attain even a fractional degree of such accuracy if both target and gun were moving. He could not do it, Jeff conceded frankly. And he doubted seriously that any man aboard the Wheel, including the Old Man himself, Admiral Berkeley, could feed into the electronic calculators the involved equations that would pull the trick.

He said uncomfortably, “Well, we’re talking high im-



probabilities. The chances are a thousand to one they'll stop short of a shooting war."

Gonzales smiled thinly.

"You hope, Corcoran," he sighed. "So do we all."

Night came abruptly as the Wheel plunged into the black cone of Earth's penumbra. Corcoran went to the Communications Deck where visiphone contact was maintained with Earth. There he requested and received permission to make a personal call. Less than three minutes later the switcher signaled him that contact was established. Jeff stepped into the scanning booth, depressed the contact key, and saw illumined on the screen before him the face of Moira Daniels. Her eyes lighted when she recognized her caller.

"Jeff, darling! When the operator said it was space elldee I hoped it would be you. How are you?"

"Fine," said Jeff. "Just fine." Then: "*Hoped* it would? Who else might it have been?"

"Now, Jeff," laughed Moira, "you're not going to play the jealous fiancé, are you? It might have been *lots* of others. Dad, for instance—" Pete Daniels was Quartermaster on a regular Earth-Moon shuttle—"or Dick, calling from Mars Central. Or Wally—"

"Wally?" Jeff's voice rose swiftly, sharply. "Wally's in service again?"

Moira looked faintly troubled. "Yes. He was recalled to active duty last week."

"But, damn it, Wally's thirty-three years old!"

"Thirty-four," corrected Moira.

"So much the worse. Too old for task-flight duty, anyway. Moira! How many classes did they call up?"

Moira said gravely, "Five, Jeff. Forty-six to fifty. It's the Pan-Am crisis. But of course you've heard?"

"And seen," said Jeff grimly. "That's one reason I'm here."

"I know," nodded Moira. "And we're depending on

you Wheelmen, too. We can't see as much as you can, Jeff. So keep an eye on them for us, will you?" Her tone was deliberately light, but her words were earnest. "And keep a steady finger on the button."

"Don't worry," promised Jeff. "I will." And then, because he had not called across the void merely to deepen the depression that already engulfed him, he shifted the conversation to more pleasant things. "But how about you, Moira? And our plans? Everything going well?"

"Perfectly, darling. The girls have been showering me like mad. I've been fretting myself into a shadow trying to decide between aluminum and brass kitchenware. The bridesmaids' dresses have been ordered, and Betsy is rehearsing violently to be the sweetest, most demure flowergirl who ever walked down an aisle. So, just like the gal in the song, I'll be ready and waiting at the altar when you get here—"

A sudden fear infused her voice, her eyes. "Jeff, you *are* coming home, aren't you? You didn't call to tell me they've cancelled your leave?"

"Nothing like that," Jeff reassured her. "There's no telling, of course, what may happen if things get worse. But so far as I know now, I'll be there to play my part in the great event of the century."

"Then let's pray nothing happens. Jeff, if anything should upset our plans now, I think I'd—"

The voice of the switcher broke in apologetically. "Sorry, sir. I must ask you to ring off. Priority call."

"Confound it," grumbled Jeff, "this isn't the only Earth-Wheel circuit, is it? You must have another—"

"Jeff, dear—" That was Moira. "It doesn't matter. We can talk again later. Good night, darling. It was wonderful seeing you."

"Moira—" called Jeff. But the screen was dark. With a blown kiss and a smile Moira had hung up. Reluctantly Jeff left the booth and wandered rimside to the Observation Deck, where for some time he sat and moodily

watched the dappled sphere of Earth turn lazily beneath the racing Wheel.

Ungeographically inverted from this vantage point, the land-masses of North and South America stood out clearly. Perhaps, thought Jeff with a sort of savage humor, the Federation dictator should serve a trick on the Wheel. If he could see the relative positions of the neighbor continents from this perspective it might allay his bellicose ambition to see his continent atop the world.

North America. Jeff picked out the broad span of the United States, and what should be the state of Illinois. At the end of Lake Michigan he saw the glittering web that was the sprawling city of Chicago. He wondered with a dully aching hunger which of those myriad fused pinpoints was the light that gleamed from Moira's window.

When at long last he turned in, it was to toss in his straps for still another hour. Finally he fell into a troubled sleep, to dream of Moira perplexedly attempting to choose between aluminum and copper kitchenware. She turned to him for help, but every time he raised a pot or pan to study it, it turned into a baleful crimson button.

Throughout the next day tension mounted steadily. Dawn observations showed the South Americans had moved again during the night. The Camera Room released a film anxiously watched by all Wheel personnel, exposures intimately disclosing the involved sectors of Earth telescopically surveyed from areas one hundred miles in diameter to detailed studies of a mere five hundred yards.

These pictures conclusively revealed the militant intentions of the Feds. Jeff estimated that no less than forty divisions were gathered at or near the Panama Canal. Where such hot embers smouldered, sooner or later one of them must burst into flame. It was a question of time, now, when the first spark would blaze—and

a moment of decision for the Wheel command. Should they act instantly to forestall the conflagration, or wait until the fire was fanned to life?

The spaceways crackled with radiograms. A special World Court messenger had been dispatched by jet to Panama. The U.N. had directed a new appeal to the Federation to lay down its arms. Cuba had offered to provide a neutral meeting place where the bickering Americas could sit down around a conference table and solve their problems amicably.

Pro-Federation sympathizers in Madrid had smashed the windows of the American embassy, and had been arrested. A swiftly organized society of Spaniards-for-Iberian-America had immediately produced bail for the culprits, and a huge, fiesta-like parade had celebrated their release from jail.

Children were being evacuated from Central American cities. Washington and Rio, Bahia and New York, were under blackout restrictions. Mexico had warned all nations that unauthorized aircraft crossed her territory at their own risk. Tension mounted tangibly on Earth . . . and in the small compartment where Jeff Corcoran sat brooding over a crimson button less than half an inch in diameter, less than half an inch from his fretful finger.

On orders, an hour since, he had plotted the coordinates that would send a lethal messenger hurtling Earthward from the Wheel to the capital city of the Federation, home city of the South American dictator, epicenter of the fever gripping all mankind. Now, as the tumult, coded and vocal, hammered at his ears, Jeff's anger mounted with each passing second.

Gabble, taunts, threats, he thought rebelliously. Interminable words cascading in a torrent that terrifies a world. Was there no peace and quiet anywhere? Yes . . . certainly. . . .

He thought of his own home in Santa Barbara; of

the green, rolling hills and placid fields, the grapes that (about now) were rounding into sweet, ripe, velvet fullness. He thought of Mom, her hair towel-turbanned, the purple stain of grape upon her hands, on straining-cloths and kettles; Mom in a steaming fragrance of the vines, moulding the fruit-pulp to taste-tempting jellies.

Dad, harvesting the grapes. And pigtailed Sis pushing the vacuum, tidying the house. And Tommy, his kid brother, delivering evening papers; papers that would bear grim headlines: *War Threat Grows. Defense Chief Orders Blackout as Peace Hopes Dwindle.*

It wasn't fair, thought Jeff, that gentle folks like these—*his* folks—must fret and fear and undergo disruption of their happy way of life because a tyrant half a world away wanted to test the power of his rule. It wasn't fair or right. A man should *do* something about it. Particularly a man who feels beneath his hand—smooth, cool, incredibly inviting—a crimson disc which, oh! so lightly pressed, could spell an instant end to such unfairness.

He thought of Moira. Moira shopping for her trousseau; Moira gravely deliberating her choice of pots and pans with which to cook the meals they two would share; Moira, her soft eyes troubled.

It wasn't fair to her—to any girl—that she must face the chilling threat of war, the knowledge that of those who ventured forth to fight, many would not come back again. War was tough on the men. It was still tougher on the women who had to sit it out, to wait with white, tensed lips for casualty reports.

It wasn't right these things should have to be when here, up here, the power lay to cry halt to these fears. *His* power. His personal and godlike power of life and death. . . .

*Hold it!* he thought. What would your Academy instructors think of that? *Mundo servire.* "To serve the



world." That was the credo of the force he represented. To sit above the world in judgment seat, but not to judge. To watch, suggest and guide . . . but to compel only when every other measure failed. This was the obligation of the Wheel, the duty of a U.N. Space Patrolman.

And yet—the Federation. War-hungry troops massed on a tense frontier. An antlike stream of warriors poised to spring; a hornet host of planes aswarm on airports, eager to dart into the air and hurl the lethal barbs of their atomic might on innocents like Moira and Sis and Mom.

How better to serve the world, he thought, then to attack those who attacked its peace? And suddenly the old line danced through his mind, "*Button, button; who's got the button?*"

And the appalling answer.

The audiophone rasped orders, and Jeff tensed in his chair. "Gunnery Post, Red alert! Stand by for instant action. Deadline at ten ack-emma."

Deadline? That meant the long-deferred firm warning had been issued. The Wheel command at last had acted, had sent an ultimatum to the Federation. *Lay down your arms*, this message would convey, stripped of high-sounding formal phrases, *We have been patient to the breaking point. We have observed your deeds, and disapprove. Disperse now. Disperse your gathered troops—or else!*

And now, thought Jeff, what next? What would the Federation's answer be? Humble compliance? Not if daSilva were right. "*You don't understand the temper of my people. Odds, danger, death, mean nothing to them.*" No, they would strike first, and the first thing they would strike would be their most dangerous assailant—the scudding mote a thousand miles above that threatened with parental punishment.

How could one tell when the missile had been

launched that would flash through space at supersonic speed to smash the Wheel? To crumble into ruin the metal moon that was man's proudest, most ambitious artifact? To dash Ezekiel's chariot from the sky so men might hew their devastating way unhampered over Earth?

To hell, he thought with sudden violence, to hell with all this mawkish indecision! It is too much to expect that we should sit here patiently, waiting to be attacked. Let's get it over with! We have the means—I have the means—to end it.

*"Button, button; who's got the button?"* I have! I, Jeff Corcoran, guardian of the skies. I, Jeff Corcoran, modern avatar of Krishna the watcher, Siva the destroyer. I, Jeff Corcoran, pro-tem god of Earth.

Convulsively his finger tensed. The crimson button yielded.

It seemed like hours, but it must have been less than two seconds that Jeff Corcoran sat stricken with dismay at what he had done. No, not what *he* had done, but what his finger, almost as if moving of its own volition, had wrought in havoc's way.

In those stunned seconds a frightful vision danced before his eyes. He saw the bomb-bay gape, the winged missile leap from the belly of the Wheel and flash toward Earth at a speed of more than a thousand miles per hour. His mind's eye spanned the distance with that weapon, saw its landing. The brief blaze in the bright Brazilian skies a split second before it struck with a crash of fury, its banshee soundwave following it to be lost in the dark thunder of an atom blast, drowning the scream of those thousands, perhaps millions, who would perish instantly.

An agony of self-reproach shook through him as he realized what he had done. For an instant panic threatened to engulf him. He half rose from his seat,

torn briefly by the mad impulse to run, to hide, in any way to flee responsibility for his wild, reckless act.

Then the training of his Academy years came to his aid. Awareness of what now must be done flooded back upon him coolly, swiftly, surely. Even as his quick mind surveyed the problem of overcoming his impetuous deed, his conditioned body was taking needed measures.

His right hand flipped the switch that opened a circuit to all interceptor rocket posts on Earth. Crisply he rapped his warning message to them:

"Interceptor Control, Earth . . . all posts. Wheel calling all Interceptor stations. Bomb loosed ninety-three ack-emma G.M.T. Target Rio. Trajectory, code three-oh-five. Firing co-ordinates nineteen degrees six minutes at declension—" He read the significant figures from the dials—"raise total screen above the target area. Raise total screen above the target area. That is all. Acknowledge to Wheel Command."

He did not wait to hear the acknowledgements begin, the buzzing drone as of a hundred bees that would rise from one interceptor post after another, acknowledgements that within the space of minutes would result in the erection of a rocket screen over the threatened sector. He knew it would take the bomb *forty-seven minutes* to reach Earth. Long before that the screen would be complete. The warhead would dispel itself against an interceptor high in the troposphere. Briefly a burst of flame would light the sky, and casual observers down below might briefly pause to marvel that a meteorite should so appear in broad daylight.

He did not wait for this. For now, his madness ended, Jeff made his second necessary call. This time his voice was not intense but dull. He said, "Ensign Jefferson Corcoran, Gunnery Post, calling Wheel Command. Please send replacement immediately. I am reporting myself under arrest."

Rear Admiral Berkeley, CINCAS, nodded Jeff into the seat across the desk from him.

"Well, Corcoran," he said, "it appears we have a few things to discuss."

Jeff said, "I have nothing to say, sir. I have no defense to offer for what I did. My training was designed to teach me better. My big mistake lay in trying to think for myself. And my thoughts were . . . confused."

*How tell another about Mom, and the fragrant scent of grapes in a steamy kitchen? About Dad and Sis and Tommy? About Moira soberly deliberating the comparative virtues of aluminum and copper kitchenware?*

"I was confused," repeated Jeff, "and I betrayed my trust. I can't excuse myself. I can only apologize and take whatever punishment is coming to me."

Berkeley steepled his fingers thoughtfully.

"It might interest you to learn that less than an hour after you did what you did, your impulse was proven to be completely unwarranted. Did you know that in response to the Wheel ultimatum the Federation forces have withdrawn from the Canal Zone? And that conference negotiations are under way?"

"No, sir. I didn't know. But I'm glad to learn it now." Jeff added evenly, "It makes me look even more of a fool, but I'm glad, anyway. It proves the Wheel can accomplish what it's here for."

"Yes, Corcoran," nodded Berkeley. "For the first time the Wheel's commanding influence for peace has been demonstrated. This may not be the last time we are called upon to act. But the need will arise less and less often as the nations understand that we are a mighty and impartial arbiter—Earth's manmade guardian angel in the sky.

"As to yourself—" The admiral pursed his lips. "What do you think should be your punishment?"

Jeff said, "That's not mine to decide, sir. There is a girl—we were to be married next month. But now I

suppose there will be a court-martial. I can offer no defense except—temporary madness, I suppose. Not insanity. Just madness of a sort. I don't expect you to understand."

"Despite which," said the admiral, "I do. I know exactly what you mean, Lieutenant Corcoran."

Jeff said automatically, "Ensign, sir."

"It is not considered good form," said the Wheel commander, "to correct a superior officer—Lieutenant."

Still for a moment the meaning of his words did not sink in. Then finally they registered. Jeff stared in stupefaction at the admiral's smile.

"Sir, I don't understand! You mean—"

"—that you have passed the test," said Berkeley. "The last and most important test that proves all Gunnery Officers aboard the Wheel. Passed it with flying colors."

"But, sir, I violated every regulation in the rule books—"

"There are some rules," said the commander, "that cannot be written in books, some regulations impossible to teach. Physical obedience can be compelled, Lieutenant; the mind is less responsive to dictation. To any authority save its own sound instinct—which today you have proven to our satisfaction."

"But the *button*, sir! I pressed the button—"

"Corcoran," the admiral asked abruptly, "how many men have tested as Gunnery candidates on the Wheel since it was built?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. Perhaps twenty?"

"The exact number is fifty-four. Now hear this. How many times would you guess that in the past a Gunnery candidate has pressed that crimson button?"

"Never," said Jeff abjectly. "No other idiot—"

"Wrong, Lieutenant. Again the correct answer is fifty-four. One moment of madness for each man who ever sat in that control seat and for dreary hours had to stare at that damned tempting disc."



He shook his head reminiscently. "I know what it feels like, Corcoran. Five years ago I sat in that seat and felt my godhead grow. And pressed that crimson button . . . as you did."

"But you—" stammered Jeff. "That means—"

"Fifty-four candidates have pressed that button. Yet only seventeen have qualified as Gunnery Officers. Now do you understand, Lieutenant? Failure lies not in the deed, but in the aftermath. More than two-thirds of those tested froze with horror at what they had done, cracked beneath the strain, lost their heads—and did nothing.

"Only sixteen others, like yourself, proved sound in the emergency. When they realized the damage they had done they went to work to undo it. To correct the mistake that—having learned their lesson—they might be expected never to repeat."

Berkeley continued gently, "The button over which you brooded, Corcoran, did not—as we allowed you to believe—actually release an atom bomb. Its mechanism was remote-controlled by a fellow officer who had previously passed the ordeal you have just endured. In the same way, your call to Earth's interceptor stations did not go out through regular channels, but was diverted so that Earth might not be unduly alarmed by a non-existent threat."

He smiled. "You understand, I'm sure, these precautions? It is a grueling test we give you, but a needed one. Ours is a grave responsibility up here. We on the Wheel have been granted the trust of three billions of people. We can place the frightful burden of that trust only on shoulders strong enough to bear it.

"When you return from your leave—which, by the way, Lieutenant, starts immediately—the button beneath your hand will be a *real* one. I think you'll find it sobering to know the power of life and death which

you control is one you have proven you can wisely exercise.

"And now, Lieutenant—if you'll permit me to wish you every happiness—" Admiral Berkeley smiled. "I'd like you to bring me back a slice of that wedding cake—"

Jeff shook hands numbly, feeling the warm pressure, knowing it to be the symbol of a new companionship, a fellowship of tested, proven men. It was at once an accolade and a transfer, the shifting of a burden much too great for any save the sturdiest of shoulders. He accepted that transfer gladly, but gravely, too.

It is no simple thing, he thought, to be a Wheelman. God has seen fit to show us the pathway to our sister stars. Let us now pray that he will help us guard our parent Earth.

## CONQUEROR'S ISLE

"You've got to believe this," said Brady. He spoke with tense, white-knuckled ferocity, his eyes intent on those of the older man. "It sounds utterly impossible, I know. It sounds—it sounds crazy. That's why I'm here. But it's the truth, and you've got to believe it! *Got to—sir,*" he finished, belatedly acknowledging his listener's seniority.

Lieutenant Commander Gorham said quietly: "At ease, Lieutenant. I'm here to consult with you as a physician, not order your cure as a superior officer. Suppose we ignore the braid while you tell me about it?"

Joe Brady smiled. It was his first smile in weeks, and his face could not quite accomplish it. His lips twisted jerkily, but his eyes remained blank windows into torment.

He said: "Thank you, Doctor. Where would you like me to begin?"

Gorham shuffled the pages of the lieutenant's case history. Random excerpts telescoped three years of spotless if not spectacular service: *Brady, Joseph Travers. . . . Age: 24. . . . Graduated, U.S.N.A., 1941. . . . Pre-Flight Training, Sarasota, 1941-2. . . . Assigned: U.S.S. Stinger. . . . Lieutenant (j.g.) 1942. . . . Group Citation. . . . Personal Citation. . . . Recommended for . . .*

"It's your story," said the doctor carefully. "You know what it is you want me to believe. The trouble began, I understand, on your last bombing mission?"

"That's right. Or rather, that's when *my* troubles began. The thing's been going on for longer than that—

much longer. Years, certainly; perhaps decades." Brady's fingers were like talons on the desk top. "Someone's got to *do* something, Doctor! Time is racing by, and with every passing day *They* grow stronger. I've got to make people understand—"

"At the beginning?" suggested Gorham. "Suppose you start with that unfortunate last flight."

His calm matter-of-fact tone had a soothing effect on the younger man. Brady's voice lost its high note of hysteria.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Very good, sir. Well, then, it was this way. We accomplished our mission and started for home—"

We accomplished our mission (said Lieutenant Brady) and started home. "Home" was, of course, the *Stinger*. I can tell you, now that the war's over, where we were and what we were doing. We were cruising the South China Sea, roughly off Palawan, between the Philippines and Indo-China. Our job was to harass enemy shipping in that area, breaking the life line between the Straits and the Nipponese home islands. Our task force was in position to support any one of a dozen land invasions from Labuan to Hainan, and our air arm periodically feinted at various concentration points to confuse the Japs.

Our latest target had been Songcau, and it was from this port we were returning when it happened.

We sighted a tramp beating her way up the coast, and I called the squadron leader for permission to unload a heavy I was carrying home undropped. He O.K.'d, and we peeled off. The freighter opened up on us with all she had as we came in, but she might as well have been throwing spit balls. We laid our egg down her aft stack, and she flew into pieces like one of those toys kids play with. You know—the kind you push a button, and *blooie!*

So that was that, and we were all talking it up and feeling pretty hot stuff when all of a sudden we discovered we were losing elevation like crazy. It seems the freighter had died like a rat, clawing in her death agony. A hunk of her exploding hide had slashed one of our wing tanks, and we were spraying gas all over the South China Sea.

Even then we weren't worried. The Navy watches out for its own, and we knew that an hour after we were forced to our life rafts, a rescue party would be out to pick us up. So we reported the bad news to the squadron leader and accepted his condolences philosophically; and with no great dismay watched the flight dwindle to black dots as we lurched along, coaxing every last possible mile out of our ruptured duck.

It would be annoying, we thought, and a nuisance. But it wouldn't be dangerous. That's what we thought.

That's what we thought, being logical guys. But in the South Pacific area you can toss logic and reason out the window.

About ten minutes after the flight had disappeared, and about one cupful of gas before we'd have to ditch, out of a bald, blue, breezeless nowhere came thundering mountains of cumulus, torrential cloudbursts of rain, and a shrieking hundred-mile gale that picked us up and whirled us like the button on a hen-coop door.

How long we rode that thing, I haven't the faintest idea. I had no time for clock-watching; I had all I could do holding the *Ardent Alice*—that was our ship's name—holding the *Ardent Alice's* nose steady in the face of that blast. It grabbed us, and shook us, and lifted and dropped us, and spun us as if we weighed ounces instead of tons. We had no way of climbing above the storm, of course; we just had to sit there and take it. At least a dozen times I was sure we were going to be slammed into the sea, but each time the unpredictable wind



jerked us upstairs again to play with us some more.

All three of us were nerve-tattered, bone-bruised, and dog-sick from the storm's beating, and not one but would have cheerfully given up a year's shore leaves to be clear of this mess. And then, suddenly—as suddenly as it had sprung from nowhere—the typhoon passed. One minute we were standing on our ears in a maelstrom of wind and rain; the next, the skies were crystal clear and a benevolent sun beamed down on a blue tranquil sea, while under the shadow of our wing tips lay the pink-and-green sanctuary of a tropical island!

Gorham coughed politely, interrupting his patient.

"Pardon me, Lieutenant. I'd like to make a note of that. It may be important. An island? *What* island?"

Brady shrugged helplessly.

I don't know, sir. We had been twisted, battered, bounced around so badly, and for so long, that none of us had any idea where we were. We might have been one mile or fifty—or five hundred!—from where the typhoon struck us."

His voice strengthened with purpose. "But wherever it is, we've got to find that island again. *Got* to! Because it's *Their* island. Unless we find it, and destroy *Them*—"

"Suppose," suggested the doctor quietly, "you go on with your story? You reached this uncharted island. And you landed safely, I take it?"

"That's right, sir. We landed safely on a sandy strip of beach—"

We landed safely (continued Lieutenant Brady) on a sandy strip of beach. We were jubilant at having made a safe harbor but uncertain as to just *how* safe the harbor was. We didn't know, you see, whether we'd been carried into friendly or enemy territory. In that God-forsaken corner of the world there was also the pos-

sibility that the island's inhabitants, if any, might be technically neutral but still dangerous. In other words, head-hunting aborigines.

Imagine our pleasure and surprise, then, when a few minutes after we'd landed we heard a cheerful hail and looked up to find white men approaching us from the wall of tropical foliage that spanned the beach.

They were smiling and unarmed, and they welcomed us in English with courteous enthusiasm. They had seen us land, said the head of their party—a youngish chap who introduced himself as Dr. Grove—and had hurried out to meet us in case anyone needed medical assistance.

I assured him we were all right, and that we needed only food, rest, and a means of communicating our whereabouts to our comrades, who by this time were undoubtedly fanned out over half the South Pacific searching for us.

He nodded. "Food and rest you shall have," he said heartily. "As for the other—those things take time in this primitive country. But we shall see; we shall see."

"We have a radio in the plane—" I began, but Jack Kavanaugh, our radioman, shook his head at me.

"*Did* have, Skipper! It went out just as we sighted the island. Must have got whanged around a bit in the storm."

"But you can fix it?"

"I suppose so. If it's nothing serious. I'll tell you better after I've had a chance to look it over."

"Of course," nodded Grove. "But in the meantime, I hope you'll accept our humble hospitality? We don't have the pleasure of entertaining new guests here very often. It will be good to chat with you all. If you'll follow me—"

There was nothing else to do. Like sheep being led to the slaughter—blindly trusting and without a strug-

gle—we followed him off the beach into a winding jungle path.

It was Tom Goeller, my gunner, who first intimated there might be something wrong about this setup. Even *he* did not really suspect anything; he was just puzzled. He wondered aloud as we pushed forward: "Where from? I don't get it!"

"Don't get what?" I asked him. "What do you mean—where from? What's biting you, Tom?"

"That Grove character," grumbled Tom. "He said they saw us land. Only—where from? Where the hell do they live? In the trees? I had a good look at this island just before we landed. A good, long look—from topside. And I didn't see a sign of anything that looked like a house."

I said: "By God, you're right! I didn't, either. I wonder if—"

But my question was answered before I voiced it. We stopped, inexplicably, before a sort of concrete shelter under a sprawling banyan tree; a lean-to sort of business in mottled green and brown—so perfectly camouflaged to conform with its surroundings that you could hardly see it from ten yards away, much less from the air.

Dr. Grove smiled and said: "Here we are, gentlemen." He touched a button, and the shelter door swung open. "If you will be good enough to enter—"

Kavanaugh spoke up roughly. "Enter what? That?"

Grove laughed pleasantly. "Don't be alarmed. It's merely an elevator. The entrance is from ground level."

"An elevator!" I exclaimed. "In this jungle? What kind of monkey business is this, anyhow? Do you mean to tell me you live underground?"

"My dear Lieutenant," said the self-styled "Doctor" languidly, "I'll be glad to explain everything—later. It's all very simple. But first I must insist that you—"

"Oh!" I interrupted. "So now you are *insisting*, eh? And suppose we prefer not to step into your mysterious little parlor? Then what?"

"Then," sighed Dr. Grove, "I should be compelled—most regretfully—to enforce my request."

"That right?" I grunted. "Guess again, pal. There are more of you than us—but we happen to be armed." I took out my automatic and held it on him. "That's one detail you seem to have overlooked. Now—"

"I overlook no details, Lieutenant," answered Grove quietly. "Would you be kind enough to fire your gun? If you have qualms against killing a man in cold blood—" his lips curled mockingly—"you might fire into the air."

I stared at him, baffled. He wasn't stalling. You can *feel* things like that. He was amused, superior, contemptuous. Goeller said: "Watch yourself, Skipper; it's a trick! He *wants* you to shoot. The sound will bring help."

Grove smiled. "Wrong, my friend. I need no help." He slipped a hand into his breast pocket. "Very well. Since you won't accept my invitation—"

Shooting was risky, but I had no choice. "O.K.," I snapped. "You asked for it!" And I squeezed the trigger. I froze on it, waiting for the blast, and the sight of his body crumpling before me.

But nothing happened!

Gorham, listening to this recital, blinked. "You mean," he suggested, "The gun missed fire—that it jammed?"

"I mean," said Brady helplessly, "it just didn't go off; that's all. It didn't miss fire. It didn't jam. There wasn't a thing wrong with it, mechanically. Later I took it down piece by piece and examined it. It was perfect. But it just wouldn't fire on that island."

Gorham said slowly: "It wouldn't fire—on that island?" His eyes on the younger man were cautious, and he was

doodling thoughtfully on the pad before him. "But that's incredible! Why not?"

"I soon found out," said Brady grimly, "about that. About that and a lot of other things—"

I stood there (said Brady) speechless. I couldn't understand. At first I thought—like you—that my gun had jammed. Then suddenly I discovered that the other men had drawn their guns too—and that they too were staring incredulously at utterly futile weapons.

"You see?" shrugged Grove. "Now, perhaps, you will be kind enough to step into the shaft?"

"Not on your life!" I blazed back. "I don't understand what's going on here. But whatever it is, I don't want any part of it. Come on, gang! Let's get out of here!"

"I'm sorry," said the doctor. "You force me to use harsh measures. Believe me, I do so reluctantly."

From his breast pocket he drew a slender tube about the size and shape of a fountain pen. He pointed it at me—at *us*, I should say, because from it suddenly flowed a silver cone of radiance.

I started to rush him, shouting something or other. But both shout and movement stopped abruptly as that curious, silvery radiance engulfed me. It wasn't a gas. It was odorless and tasteless; it did not burn or sting or cause pain in any way. But it was as though I had charged into an ocean of lambent cobwebs, to become enmeshed in a shroud of moonbeams. I could neither move nor speak; only my senses functioned.

As in a dream, I heard Dr. Grove bid his followers: "Place them in the shaft. Gently, please!" Then the feel of hands lifting, carrying me; they felt—how can I explain it?—they felt *far away* upon my body, as though layers of sponge rubber lay between their flesh and mine.

I could see, too, but only straight ahead of me, in the



direction in which my pupils were fixed. I couldn't move my eyes. So I saw only that the interior of the elevator was of smooth, polished metal, anomalous in these surroundings. I heard the whine of an electric motor and sensed, rather than felt, the motion of our swift descent.

Dr. Grove leaned over me, thrusting himself into my line of vision.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," he said. "I sincerely regret having had to inconvenience you. But, you see, firearms won't work on this island. No explosions of any kind are permitted—unless by special arrangement. We have means of hampering your primitive mechanical devices. That is why your guns did not fire, and why your radio will not operate."

I was filled with a thousand questions, but I could not ask them, not even with my eyes. "*What are these means?*" I wanted to ask him. "*And who, or what, are you that you should speak of a radio as a primitive mechanical device? Where are we going, and what are you planning to do with us?*" All these questions hammered at my brain, but my tongue was silent.

Then the sensation of movement stopped, I heard the elevator door slide open, and our captors lifted us again. I saw the metal ceilings of long, well-lighted corridors, and heard voices proclaiming the presence of many more persons in these subterranean vaults, and once was silent witness to a conversation between Grove and someone apparently his superior.

"Well, Frater?"

"I'm sorry, Frater Dorden. It was necessary. They would not come willingly."

"I see." A sigh. "Few of them do. Ah, well—put them in sleeping chambers until they recover. . . . And be gentle. They are frightened, poor devils."

And then our journey continued through a maze of clean-gleaming metal corridors, until finally I was car-

ried through a doorway and placed tenderly on a cot. A light covering was thrown over me; its pleasant warmth made me realize how weary I was. I could not close my eyes, but the lights were dimmed slowly, and at last in utter darkness I forgot my troubles in sleep. . . .

I do not know whether the return of lights awakened me, or whether some unseen control automatically brought back the illumination when I awoke. At any rate, I roused from my slumber to find the room bright again.

Even more important was the fact that I could move. I leaped from my cot and sprang to the door at the other side of the room but, as I had expected, it was locked. So I gave up, for the time being, any idea of attempting to escape and set myself to a study of my surroundings.

For one thing, I was alone. Apparently our captors had assigned each of us to a separate chamber, or cell. This one was Spartan in its simplicity. Four walls of a dull gray metallic substance I could not immediately identify—a floor of some resilient rubber or plastic composition—a low ceiling of the same material as the walls. A cot, a chair, and a desk were the only furnishings. There were no decorations on the walls; no carpet covered the floor; and of course—since we were underground—there were no windows.

What amazed me most was that there were no lighting fixtures. I looked in vain for any source from which originated the pleasant, unflickering illumination that flooded the room. I found nothing. It was no jiggery-pokery of indirect lighting, either. The flow of light was constant and, oddly enough, there were no shadows!

I think that's when I started to get frightened. I don't mean flabby-lipped, knock-kneed scared, but *cold*. Cold

and awed and numb, like—well, the way a trapped rabbit must feel when it sees the hunter approaching.

These persons, these men who spoke with indifferent contempt of mankind's finest accomplishments, who regretfully and casually employed weapons and tools unknown to science—who were they? And why had we been separated? Where were my comrades—Kavanaugh and Goeller? Suddenly, desperately, I needed the reassurance of their presence.

I raised my voice and shouted. There was no reply. The impassive walls, being metal, should have echoed the panic in my voice. But, like everything else in this strange place, it behaved unnaturally. It absorbed the sound, sopping it up as a sponge absorbs water.

I shouted again and again. Fruitlessly, I thought. But not fruitlessly. For suddenly I heard the faintest sound behind me and whirled. Dr. Grove was stepping through the wall.

Lieutenant Brady stopped abruptly, as if in anticipation of his listener's reaction. It came. Gorham, despite his training as a psychiatrist, stopped doodling and tossed a swift, anxious frown at the younger man.

With an obvious effort he erased the sudden pursing of his lips. He said quietly: "Through the *wall*, Lieutenant? Of course you mean through the *door*?"

"Through the wall," said Brady dully. "Through the wall, sir. The door was in front of me. But Dr. Grove stepped into my cell through the solid metal wall."

"You realize," said Gorham, "that what you are saying is impossible?"

"To us—" Brady's eyes were haggard—"it is. To *Them*, nothing is impossible. Nothing! Or very little. That is why we must act, and act *now*! Before it is too late. You must believe me, sir! This is man's last chance—"

"I'll do my best," promised Gorham. "Perhaps you'd

better continue? This Dr. Grove stepped through the wall—”

I'll cut it short (said Brady wanly). I'll tell it as quickly as I can. I'm just wasting your time and mine. I can tell by your eyes that you don't believe me. But someone must. Somewhere, somehow, sometime—someone must. . . . Well, as I was saying, Dr. Grove stepped through the wall. And strange as it may sound, in that moment my panic ended. I still *feared*; yes. But I feared as a man fears a god, or a demon, or a raw and elemental force beyond his comprehension. I did not look on him with dread, as one watches a human foe charge upon him with flaming gun or blood-stained sword; I looked on him with awe, knowing him to be as far above and beyond me in the life scale as I am superior to a dog or a beast of burden.

So it was we talked—not as man to man, but as man to a lesser creature. And I was the lesser creature. He was the master, I the serf. And he told me many things. . . .

Has it ever occurred to you, Doctor, that we humans are an egotistic race? Our Darwins and our Huxleys have told us we are the product of a steady, progressive evolution—an evolution that started in primeval slime and has gradually developed to our present proud and self-proclaimed status as *homo sapiens*.

*Homo sapiens*—intelligent man! . . . But perhaps we are not so intelligent, at that. For in our blind folly we have assumed ourselves to be the final and glorious end product of Nature's eternal striving toward perfection!

Could we not guess that the same force which led the first lungfish from primordial ooze to solid earth—the force which evolved the Neanderthal man from his bestial, hairy ancestor, and developed from this rock-hurling caveman a race that works its destruction with

atomic fission—could we not have guessed that this force would inevitably progress a step farther?

That is what has happened. There dwells upon earth today a race representing the *next step* in man's progress. A people to whom our thoughts are as immature and elementary as to us is the prattling of infants.

They begin where we leave off. Our vaunted physics and mathematics are their nursery ABC's; the hard-won learning of our best brains is theirs intuitively. They *sense* what we must study; and what they must study, we cannot even begin to grasp. They are the new lords of creation—*homo superior!*

How they came to be, that is one thing even they do not know. There is a force called "mutation" which you, as a doctor, must understand better than I. By mutation a white rose appears among red, and the white breed true from that time on. The new men are mutants. They—or the first of them—were born of normal parents. But from the cradle they sensed that they were different. Having a telepathic instinct, they were able to discern their brothers in a crowd—or even over long distances—and they banded together.

Long ago—how long Dr. Grove did not tell me—the new men decided they must isolate themselves from us. It was a logical decision. They had no more in common with us than we have with our pets. Few men, by choice, dine with dogs or sleep in stables.

So they sought this secluded island in the Pacific far from lesser man's civilization. They went underground to escape detection. There they live, and study, and learn, and wait with infinite patience for the day when they must emerge and take over the world which is theirs by inheritance—even as *homo sapiens* took it from his beetle-browed forebear, the ape man.

"We are few in number," Grove told me, "but we increase with each passing year. Some are born here; others come from the four corners of the earth, drawn



to us by mental *rapport*. Soon we will be many enough, and strong enough, to accept the responsibility of government of all the earth."

"You mean," I said, "destroy man? And claim the entire world for yourselves?"

Grove said almost sadly: "How little you understand us, you humans. Do you destroy the animals of the field just because they are not your intellectual peers? Our obligation is to keep and protect you; to act as your friendly guardians in a world that will be strange to you, and frightening.

"Yes, frightening," he went on as I began some protest. "I saw the dread and horror in your eyes when I walked into the room. You did not understand how I passed through a wall that to you seems solid. Not understanding, you feared.

"Yet there is nothing supernatural or fearful about what I did; about what any of us can do at will. There is no such thing as a solid in a universe wherein all things—size and dimension and substance—are but relative. We know there is room and to spare for the molecules comprising our persons to pass unhindered through the molecules comprising these walls. We simply make a necessary mental adjustment—and walk where we will. It is an ability as basic, as fundamental, to us as breathing is to a person like you."

"Then what," I asked him, "is your plan for man?"

"Your question should be," he replied gently, "what is Nature's plan for man? And I believe the question answers itself. The answer lies in history. What became of Nature's earlier experiments: the giant reptiles, the anthropoids, the men who dwelt in caves and trees?"

"They died out," I said. "Civilization passed them by. They fell before the onrush of higher life forms."

"Even so," Grove said regretfully. "Even so. But you have our pledge that we will be kind. We will be kind."

You see, that was the essence of the matter. These new men are intelligent, a thousandfold more intelligent than we. And being that great step further along the path to perfection, they are born with the instinct to gentleness. That is why their weapons anesthetize, but do not harm. They will not, they *cannot*, kill.

I could go on for hours relating what I heard and saw during the three weeks I was prisoner in the subterranean refuge of the new men. I'll tell only a few things, because I can see you—like all the others—think I am mad. But there are some things you should know.

Those metal cells hold more than two hundred humans like you and me, men and women who have stumbled by accident upon the hideaway island and have been restrained there lest they go back and tell the world of the conquest to come.

They are comfortable, of course. They are well fed and housed, entertained and made as happy as possible—under the circumstances. Men do not ruthlessly destroy their pets. And on that island, men are the wards of supermen.

I could quote names that would amaze you. A famous author and traveler whose ship disappeared some years ago in the Pacific—a big-game hunter supposedly killed—an aviatrix for whom a dozen fleets sought in vain. They are there.

I could tell you something else that would make the small hairs creep on the back of your neck—if you dared let yourself believe it. *They* are here among us already, the new men. As their hour of ascendancy approaches, they are paving the way for their bloodless conquest. Some of them have left the island and taken their places in our world. You can see the master plan. A handful of them settled in key spots—here a politician, there an industrial magnate, there an author whose every

word is gospel to his readers—what chance has a race of underlings to combat them when they strike?

And they *will* strike, and soon. When they do, that will be our end as the rulers of earth. For they cannot fail in anything they try. We, as a people are strong. But *They* are omnipotent!

"That is why," concluded Brady, "you've got to make yourself believe me, no matter how crazy this sounds. You've got to, Doctor. From the broader point of view, perhaps it's better they should inherit the earth. But I am a human. And as a member of my race, I do not want to fall before a higher culture, no matter how superior.

"I want to live! And if we want to live, *They* must die. Their island must be destroyed, utterly and completely. An atomic bomb—"

"You have said," interrupted Dr. Gorham, "that they are omnipotent. You have called them wise with the wisdom of demigods. Yet you escaped from their island without outside help. Is that proof of their superhuman intelligence?"

Brady shook his head.

"It is proof of their great kindness, and my animal cunning.

"There is a chink in their armor. I took advantage of it. They cannot willfully cause any creature pain. Knowing this, I begged Grove to take me to the surface so I could get some things from the *Ardent Alice* one day. Some personal belongings, I told him. Pictures of my loved ones that I had hidden in a secret compartment of the plane.

"He agreed. We had been on friendly terms for some weeks, and he suspected no treachery. That is a human trait. They cannot conceive of guile or deceit.

"He was careless, and I was desperate. He turned to look when I cried out and pointed to something behind him; he never knew what hit him. I don't know whether my rock killed him or not. I hope not.

"The plane, of course, was useless. But there were self-inflating life rafts, and the water was only yards away. I paddled from that devil's shore with the strength of a madman. You know the rest: How my food and water ran out. How they found me raving deliriously days or maybe weeks later, bearded and sun-blistered and more than half dead."

Dr. Gorham nodded and quietly closed the memo book in which he had scratched only doodles.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Yes. It must have been a terrible experience."

He rose.

"Well, Lieutenant—" he said awkwardly.

Lieutenant Brady stared at him with hopeless eyes.

"You don't believe me, either," he said. "Do you?"

"It's been a pleasure listening to your story," the medico said. "I'll make a report to my superiors. Please be patient and try not to worry. Good day, Lieutenant."

"Go to hell!" said Lieutenant Brady dully. "Oh, go to hell—" he added mechanically—"sir."

The doctor stiffened, then gazed compassionately at the younger man for an instant, shrugged, and left the narrow chamber.

Outside, another medical officer greeted him.

"Ah, there, Gorham! You've talked with him? What's the verdict?"

Gorham touched his forehead. "A clear case of persecution mania—an amazing form. I've never heard a tale so complete and logical, but—" He shrugged. "Do what you can for him. I'm afraid he's going to be here for a long time—perhaps for as long as he lives. Turned loose, he might be dangerous."

The other medical officer shook his head.

"Tough! A nice boy, too. But it does nasty things to a man, floating for weeks in a life raft. He was the only one of his crew to survive. Well, Doctor—will you lunch with me?"

"No, thanks," said Gorham. "I've got to run along. Have to turn in a report and a recommendation on this case."

"Of course. See you later, then."

The other medico disappeared down the spotless corridor of the mental ward. Gorham pondered briefly, orienting himself. He was in the west wing of the hospital, facing the street. His car stood at the curb just outside. He was very busy. There was so much work to be done; so much. And if he walked through the anteroom, some fool was sure to delay him, drag him into a long-winded discussion. He didn't feel a bit like talking. He wanted to get out of this place and forward his report—his report that the Brady case was closed. That there would be no more trouble from that source.

He glanced swiftly up and and down the corridor. There was no one in sight. His senses told him the street was also deserted. There was no danger of his being seen. So—

So Dr. Gorham turned and walked quietly through the wall.



*This extraordinary story is based on the theory of the Nobel-Prize-winning scientist Arrhenius, that the entire universe is filled with the "spores" of life.*

## LIFE GOES ON

After an unguessed time, Carruthers stirred. After uncounted hours of black nothingness, Carruthers stirred and rose and looked about. He stood upon the crest of what appeared to be a monstrous crag, the rocky hilltop of some pebble in the sky, a lonely land unmarked by human artifact. Above, the vault of airless space was spangled by the fierce, eternal stars: Aldebaran and Vega, Betelgeuse and Deneb. Carruthers scanned them with a spaceman's eyes.

"Well," he said, "at least I'm in the solar system. But where? For all I know—"

He paused abruptly, startled and dismayed. He had voiced his thoughts aloud. Yet though his body ached with cosmic cold, no hoarfrost film of breath appeared before his lips. . . . Nor had he heard his spoken words!

A sudden terror gripped him. He whispered hoarsely, "This is it, then? I'm dead?"

He lifted his hands, held them before his searching eyes. Strong, sun-bronzed, muscular hands, they did not seem to bear the fleshless fingers of a fearful ghost. But—

*—But how could one living move and sense and feel . . . and yet not breathe or hear?*

Carruthers groaned, and with an effort forced his tortured mind down the gray, sluggish paths of recollection. . . .

Remembrance surged back slowly. Winterby and himself, the sole survivors of the crash that wrecked the spaceship *Catapult*, Earthbound from Saturn. The dreadful panic of that final hour. The frantic haste with which they cast off from the dying ship in the only undamaged lifeskiff. Then the slow days of aimless wanderings through the void as fuel tanks drained and rations dwindled low, hope waning within them as sextant readings showed the nearest human colony to be so far away that while *one* man might reach its haven alone, two must surely die for lack of food and drink and precious oxygen.

And then the hour when, roused from fitful sleep, he struggled to one elbow to find the wolf-lean face of Winterby above his own, to feel the hands of Winterby at his throat. The other spaceman's lips were thin and hard.

"It's you or me, Carruthers. There's not enough of anything for both of us. Maybe I can make it alone. So—"

Then came the blow.

What happened next was like an evil dream. Numbed and half-conscious, Carruthers felt his companion half lift, half roll him to the airlock, slam the gate and press the lever that expelled the port. The outer lock-gate clanged back in its groove, the icy silence and the cold of space rushed in. The emptiness sucked Carruthers to its still embrace, stifling his half-drawn breath, his leaping pulse, stilling his heart, his very thoughts. Then nothingness. . . .

And that was all—till now.

Now he stood upon the rim of a stark hill upon a mote of matter whirling in the infinite debris of space. He stood without breathing, with unbeating heart; he

existed in an airless, heatless void; a living paradox: one who endured despite the unendurable.

So went Don Carruthers' thoughts.

"I'm dead, of course," he said to himself. "But—can *this* be death? Death should be a sleep and a forgetting. A final peace. How can the dead feel hatred as I do? Winterby!" He growled the name. "If I could only meet him once again. Winterby—"

He stopped. A voice, so thin it seemed the whisper from a dream, spoke words not of his mind's imagining.

"Carruthers—"

Startled, Dan Carruthers whirled. No living creature stood within the circle of his searching gaze.

"Carruthers—"

"Who speaks?" Carruthers cried. "Who calls my name?"

The soft voice answered, and suddenly Carruthers realized it was not one but many tongues that spoke. Nor were they really tongues as men know tongues, because the bee-thin echo rose within himself. It stirred along his veins, his ganglia, through his neural passages as through the wires of a power line hums the insistent current of a dynamo.

The voices said, "We are not one entity, but many brethren, infinitely small, who have waited upon this gray and lifeless shard of rock for untold eons. We are sentient but fleshless. Until now we have lain immobile, unable to find body for that personality which is *ourselves*."

"Now, at last, the way to life has opened to us. When a short time ago your body drifted to our prison rock, chance offered us a vehicle in which to dwell, and spawn, and live, and grow."

"You are—in me?" choked Carruthers, appalled.

"We are not merely in you; we *are* you. It is our life-force that lifts your stumbling body to its feet, enabling

it to move. Your memories are ours, as soon ours will be yours. Our brethren flood your brain-cells as on your native Earth in spring a hive is overrun with swarming bees.

"We are an ancient race reborn in you. Your flesh provides for us a citadel in which to breed and live again."

"Then that is why I do not have to breathe in airless space?" stammered Carruthers. "That is why I stand in subzero cold and still do not turn to ice?"

The answer came back softly: "That is why. The personality which was yourself, Carruthers, is no more. Only your fleshly housing still endures.

"But do not fear, or give in to despair. The change is great, but it brings recompense. Our host will always worship at the shrine of your great godhood which has given us life—and in the fullness of the years to come, you, too, will share the glory of our race."

"Glory!" cried Carruthers bitterly. "What kind of glory is this? I'd rather die outright than be a walking corpse, the deathless host of spawning parasites. Let me die! Give me a swift and clean destruction. Let me end this grim travesty on death."

He struggled to throw himself forward, willing his limbs to hurl his body from the hilltop to the crags that lay below. But he could not move. The minuscule intelligences gripped his muscles in a band of steel, and through his veins the gentle voices coursed:

"Don't be afraid, Carruthers. For a little while your brain may be tormented, true. But soon all human trends of thought will vanish; then you will be truly one with us. Our dreams will be your dreams, our thoughts your thoughts; our racial memories will be part and parcel of yourself.

"Behold, within this little time already you have grasped a portion of our stranger lore. Open your mind to us, Carruthers. Read our past."

Carruthers let the voices have their will.

The invisible swarm within him spoke the truth. As one who drifts in fever-haunted dreams, Carruthers felt himself to be a dancing spore no denser than a sunbeam. Lithe and free, unhampered by a fleshly covering, he found himself afloat in darkling space. Whence he came he could not guess, nor where his destination lay. But deep within his sentience dwelt a knowledge, deep and strong, that he must float until that time when he and those who swirled about him in a filmy cloud should come to rest upon a fertile world where there was water, earth and sustenance.

There, instinct told him, he must seek a living cell, within it take root and lend to it his quota of intelligence, that it and he might merge and he infuse its protoplasmic ignorance in order that from its primeval blob, in ages hence, might Man evolve. . . .

The vision faded. Carruthers murmured softly to himself, "There was an Earthly scientist, Arrhenius by name. Long years ago he voiced the theory that from a source unguessably remote in time and space throughout the void, are universally diffused the spores of life, which, when they find a resting place which will sustain them, spawn and germinate. Then—this is what you are? And what I have become companion to?"

He did not need their assenting response. He knew without it he had guessed the truth. And with the assurance came a quietude, an acquiescence to the master plan of someone—or of something—greater than himself.

And yet—yet there was part of him which remained a human still. For in his heart still burned a human flame, the fierce and unforgotten fire of hate. That he must die . . . while Winterby, his murderer, still lived, this was the thing that filled him with dark fury.

Winterby—

He sensed a quickening along his peopled veins, as those who were a part of him were stirred by his emo-



tions as he had been by theirs. And to himself he voiced the silent thought, "If I could only meet him once again, for but the briefest moment—"

"You can, Carruthers," said the voices.

"I can?"

"But certainly. You have but to will the deed, and with the speed of light your resurrected body now can span the farthest reaches of the vault of space.

"A short time since, this enemy of yours whisked by our rock in his metallic skiff. Pursue him if it pleases you to do so. We who are your friends, care not."

Carruthers whirled; his arms rose high. And like an arrow speeding from a bow, his body flashed into the yawning void.

Brief was the journey; in an instant's time Carruthers hovered once again beside the fleeing skiff. Inside, contentedly unaware, Winterby drank in celebration of his triumph. Drank and laughed and lifted high a glass in mocking toast.

"To you, Carruthers! Too bad it had to be this way. But it was you or me, and I could not—"

His laughter ended in a sudden gasp. The wine glass fell and splintered on the deck as through the cabin doorway stepped the man whose body he had jettisoned into space.

"Carruthers!"

Carruthers' voice was cold and grating.

"Yes, Winterby. I have come back—for you."

"But you—you can't come back!" screamed Winterby.

"I killed you. You're dead, Carruthers; dead!"

Carruthers nodded grimly.

"True. But even so, I have you as companion."

"No!" cried Winterby. From its holster he tugged a heat gun. "Go back! Wherever you came from, go back!" he cried—and pressed the stud.

A tongue of flame lashed out to bathe Carruthers in a flood of lethal coruscation. A hole that widened like a

sloughing sore appeared in Dan Carruthers' breast; the stench of burning flesh was nauseous. But Carruthers felt no pain. Laughing, he moved steadily forward on the other man.

In vain Winterby hurled his gun away and scrambled for the air lock, reckless of the certain doom awaiting him outside. Carruthers' hands were icy as they closed about the throat of him who had once been shipmate and friend. The strong fingers tightened, froze, relaxed, expelled. And Winterby slipped lifeless to the deck. . . .

Then slowly said Carruthers to himself, "Now there are two of us, both doomed, both dead. Two lifeless bodies fit for clay and worms—upon the Earth we sprang from.

"But out here there is a better purpose we two can serve. Within my carcass—soon, perhaps, in his as well—reside the fecund spores of life: Life which, if given an opportunity, can people a new planet, a new world. A better world, it may be, than the one which gave us birth.

"I am not sure. Already, now, the thoughts which were Carruthers' fade and merge. I am becoming, as they said I would, a part of themselves as they are part of me. Before it is too late, then, there is one final gift I can give them; one last service I can render to the spores—"

He turned to the control-board of the skiff. With slow, uncertain hands he set the dials, establishing a new trajectory. Setting a course toward a distant spot in space where, between the orbits of red Mars and mighty Jupiter, a host of lifeless asteroids pursue their endless rounds about the mother Sun.

"Here we will find," mused Dan Carruthers, now one with his symbiotic guests, "water and food and air. On Iris, Ceres, Pollux we will breed—and in the centuries that lie ahead, evolve into our destined perfect form."

So whispered Dan Carruthers. Then he fell. A myriad bee-thin voices sang his dirge.

All this was long ago. In later days men marveled to discover crawling life upon the erstwhile sterile planetoids. Marveled, and in their blind complacency did not see that on one far and distant future day when *their* empire had toppled, from these rocks would spring anew the hardy seed of Man.

Thus two men died that Man might always live. Thus life was born upon the asteroids. . . .

## UNCOMMON CASTAWAY

Heed Ye! 'Ware and repent, I cry, and woe to him who will not hear my warning! For verily I say unto you that the Day of Judgment neareth, when for your sins and your iniquities shall be visited upon you the fire and the sword of Those whose fury maketh the earth to tremble; yea, the very sea to burn!

They shooed us out of Alexandria when Rommel pressed past Mersa Matruh and down the long sandy highway that leads to Cair. Shooed us, but fast. The Admiralty said there was nothing we *could* do but hide out in safe harbors until events disclosed whether Montgomery's plan for a last-ditch stand at a dot on the map called El Alamein was sound strategy or—as almost everyone feared—pure desperation.

The Old Man hated like blazes to run. When I handed him the order, he grunted and his teeth met through his pipestem. He didn't even swear—which just proves how deeply he was moved, because the skipper is an educated man. He cusses fluently in six languages. At trifles.

But this was too big. He just shook his head and said, "Very good, Sparks. Carry on!" And turned and walked forward, very fast.

So the *Grampus*, under cover of a jet Egyptian night, slipped out to sea and safety. The West Harbor was like a coal pit; even the lighthouse on Raset-Tin was blacked out. But the darkness was alive with sounds. The incessant wash of Mediterranean waters against the crags

of Pharos . . . the high, flat notes of a bosun's key, piping-thin against the sigh of a westering breeze . . . the mute ripple of voices from ships that glided dimly past, cheerless as drifting wraiths. Gray sounds, angry sounds. The petulant farewell of vessels evacuating a harbor that had been, but a few short months ago, Britain's proudest base along the North African coast.

"We're to be first out," the Old Man told us. "The fleet will need every sub. Particularly if the Jerries take Alex." He added, glancing skyward speculatively, "The deck guns will be manned. There may be trouble."

But there wasn't. We didn't lose a single ship or a single man to the enemy action throughout the operation. Funny, too, because we were fish in a barrel for the Stukas. Jammed in the bottleneck too tightly to offer effective resistance, and many of us in foul shape. Like the *Grampus*, which had put in for G.O. and repairs, and got her sailing orders before the job was half finished.

But maybe it wasn't so strange after all. The Germans were pretty cocky in those days. And I suppose they had reason to be. But their very cockiness was our salvation. I think they didn't bomb us during our flight simply because they expected to take Alexandria any day, and didn't want to move into a shattered naval base.

Anyhow, we cleared the breakwater without a sign of trouble, and were under way. We weren't told where we were going, but since our course was due nor'east, it was clear to every man aboard that Larnaca was our goal. Cyprus, a mere three hundred sea miles away, should have been a snap day's journey, but no one was starry-eyed enough to think we'd make it that quickly. There was, for one thing, the constant possibility of encountering enemy craft, aerial or sea-borne. Moreover, a dropping glass warned of weather ahead. And to further louse up an already gloomy picture, our spit-and-prayer-patched engines started coughing and spluttering even before we cleared Pharos light.



Auld Rory, our cook, didn't like the situation, and said as much when I braced him for a cup of tea in the galley after we were safely out to sea.

"'Tis a verra bad business, this," growled the old Scot, "'Tisna richt for a navvy to roon awa', wi'oot even makin' a fight fo't. 'Tisna"—he scowled, fumbling for the word he wanted—" 'tisna deegnified!"

I grinned and told him, "Maybe not, Rory, but it's a lot healthier. As Shakespeare says in *Paradise Lost*, 'He who fights and pulls his freight, will live to fight some other date.'"

"The noble Bard," gritted Auld Rory savagely, "didna write *Paradise Lost*. 'Twas the great John Milton. Nor is the verse as ye've misquoted it, ignorant Yank that ye are!"

"I've told you a thousand times, Rory," I chuckled, "that I'm not an American. I'm British subject, born and diapered in dear old Fogville-on-the-Thames."

"Your words make ye a liar!" flared Auld Rory. "Ye speak the mither tongue as if it had na feyther."

"That," I said, "is because I grew up in Brooklyn."

"Oh? Ye told me once New York."

"A suburb of Brooklyn. You must come with me to Flatbush one day, Rory. Quite a place. You ought to hear the Ladies' Day crowds at Ebbets Field yelling at the umpires. *Moider dat bum! Give him de woiks—*"

"Bum!" gasped Rory, outraged. "Wi' ladies present? 'Tis indecent. I'm ashamed o' ye, Jake Levinel!" He brooded darkly as I sipped my tea. "And I *still* say this is a bad business. In the harbor, at least we had shore batteries and a deefensive position. But that wasna gude eno' for the brass. No! So here we are, alone and limpin' in the middle o' the gory Mediterranean, prey to God knows *what* yon rascals will send to plague us! 'Tis a wonder we ha' na already been attacked, that it is."

"Calm down, Rory," I laughed, "and give your ulcers a rest. These waters are reasonably safe. Bet you five

bob we don't even *sight* an enemy, let alone . . . *Hey!*"

What a prophet! My forecast ended in a startled yelp as the unmistakable *gurr-oom!* of a deck gun shuddered through the ship. The *Grampus* bucked and quivered. Tea scalded my wrists. Voices rose in excited query, and were lost in the strident clamor of the ship's alarm system.

And over it all: "I'll take that bet!" bawled Auld Rory.

I broke from the galley and raced toward the radio room. Weaving through the passageway, I met members of the gun crew scurrying from topside to their submer-sion posts. I grabbed Rob Enslow's arm.

"Planes?"

"The bloody sky's full of 'em!"

I heard their motors now, droning with the fretful tumult of a broken wasps' nest. The Jerries had not wanted to blast us in harbor, but were coming out to catch us in open sea. The Old Man's clipped, unhurried voice was oddly reassuring.

"All hands, stand by! Rig for diving!" The valves opened, the wheeze of escaping air mingled with the gurgle of ballast water, and we nosed under. I reached my compartment and lurched to the instrument panel. Walt Roberts, ship's yeoman, was there. He glanced up.

"You all right, Jake?"

"Sure," I said. "You?"

"Top hole." Then, after a moment: "We're under."

I nodded. "Yeah. We'll be okay now, unless some of those big babies carry depth bombs."

"That's so," said Walt. "But maybe they didn't this time."

"Probably not," I decided. "It must be a land-based flight, out of Bardia. I'll bet there's not a depth bomb in the lot of them . . ."

Or that's what I *started* to say. I don't know if I ever finished the sentence or not.

For suddenly there sounded a dull booming roar. The *Grampus* jerked as though struck by a monstrous fist.

Then it seemed to shake itself and leap, like a sailfish fighting the hook. Again the alarm bell dinned—then stopped abruptly as the lights flared to brief, eye-searing brightness and went out. A hot tingling pulsation, like electricity gone mad, flowed through and twisted me in knots. The *Grampus* tilted, my feet flew out from under me, and I slid head first across the slanting deck. My head struck the bulkhead. That's all I remember. . . .

The umpire bawled, "Stuh-rikel!" I jumped to my feet, roaring fury shared by a bleachers full of fellow townsmen.

"Go get glasses, you bum!" I hollered. "That ball was a mile outside!"

I picked up my cushion and spun it onto the diamond. A hand fell on my shoulder, and a park cop glared at me malevolently. "Okay, you! Come wit' me!"

I said, "Get your hands off me!" and struggled to shake myself free. Someone—a friend in the crowd—cried from a distance, "Jake? Are you all right, Jake?"

"Let go!" I snarled. "This is a free country! Let go, before I—"

The hand clutching my shoulder tightened. The voice drew nearer and clearer. "Jake? Are you all right, Jake?"

Ebbets Field faded; its sun-drenched bleachers became the lightless, dank interior of the *Grampus*. The hand and voice belonged to Walt Roberts. "Jake—"

"Okay," I said. "I'm okay, Walt." I craned my neck gingerly. "Thanks, pal. You just saved me from ten bucks or ten days."

"Eh?"

"Skip it," I said. "Where are we?"

"On the bottom. That depth charge did something to us—I don't know exactly what. Fortunately it's not so deep here."

"That's swell," I said. "That's perfectly ducky!" I was scared spitless, but I wasn't going to let him know it.

"If we were fish, we wouldn't have far to go. Are we taking water?"

"No. Apparently not."

"Then what's wrong with the batteries? How come no lights?"

"I wouldn't know," said Roberts.

"Well, let's go see," I suggested.

We felt our way through the ship, and met others doing the same thing. There was tenseness, but no panic. And don't get the idea that discipline had been relaxed, just because we were allowed to do what we wanted. It was just that the Old Man has brains, as well as braid. He knew how everyone felt, and so long as no one got in the engineer's way, he allowed us to satisfy our curiosity.

There were emergency lamps in the engine room, and a sweating corps straining over the motors. The chief engineer was not so worried as frankly bewildered.

"Oddest thing I ever saw, sir," I heard him tell the Old Man. "It's not just concussion damage, or a short. It's as if the whole electrical unit had been picked up and—and *twisted* out of shape, somehow."

"That's the way it felt," grunted the skipper. "The ship seemed to writhe and wriggle like an eel."

"Yes, sir. The bus bars are a solid lump. And the wiring—" The chief shook his head.

"But you can fix it?"

"I think so, sir. Yes, I'm sure we can."

"Very good. Carry on!" The Old Man turned quietly to the rest of us. "You heard the chief, lads. Now you know as much as we do. Let's all go to our stations, and let these men work."

So we did, and that was that. Some time later, the lights flickered on again. After another long, hopeful wait we heard the tentative hum of the Diesels, followed by the throb of a turning shaft. Then the skipper's voice

over the com system: "All hands, attention. All clear. We're taking her up."

It was broad daylight when, after making certain no enemy craft were in the vicinity, the *Grampus* surfaced. We were under a blanket of radio silence, of course, but in the hope of sighting a friendly vessel, the skipper told me to get my flags and come along topside with him.

That fresh air sure smelled good, and the sun felt good, too. But we'd lost the other ships in our convoy—if you'd call it that. The horizon was clear as far as the eye could reach. Not a dot on the water.

No, there was *one* dot. The Old Man spotted it before any of us leveled his binoculars on the dancing black fleck and grunted thoughtfully.

"A man—on a raft, or a spar. A survivor, perhaps. I imagine one of the ships didn't get off as lightly as we did." He sighed. "Bring her about, mister. We'll pick him up."

The second saluted and ducked below. A few minutes later, we hove within hailing distance of the derelict.

Now, here's where the wacky part of my story comes in. You'd think that survivor should have been tickled pink to see us, wouldn't you? Would have waved and yelled at us?

But not this lunkhead! For the longest time, he didn't even seem to see us. Or if he did, he tried to let on like he didn't. He wouldn't answer our calls, though we must have been within hearing range.

"Deaf?" wondered the skipper aloud.

"Possibly, sir," said the second. "But he must *see* us. He could at least call for help."

"Deaf and dumb?" offered the skipper.

"Or," I suggested, "just plain dumb, sir?" Because at this moment the man definitely saw us. He rose from his awkward kneeling posture, but instead of waving his arms, or part of the tattered rags in which he was clad, the damn fool loosed a hoarse cry of alarm, leaped off his



rickety old raft, and started flailing *away* from us as fast as his skinny arms would carry him.

The Old Man grunted understanding. "Oh, now I see! An enemy. Very good! Fetch him aboard, lads!"

So we did. But we had to knock him unconscious to do it. Two of the seamen went into the briny after him. Catching him was like wrestling a barracuda. He kicked and bit and clawed, and almost scratched one of Bill Ovens's eyes out. That made Bill a bit peevish, so while his comrade grappled with the guy, face to face, Bill slipped up aft and let him have it behind the ear.

And the *Grampus* had picked up a passenger.

Some time later, when I was telling Walt about the fracas, the Old Man buzzed me.

"Levine? Would you step forward, please?"

I found him waiting for me before the compartment in which our passenger had been locked. He took his pipe from his mouth and stared at me thoughtfully.

"Levine, you're Jewish, aren't you?"

"Why, yes, sir."

"Orthodox?"

I said, "No, sir. My mother and dad are, but I—"

"No matter," he said. "Listen!"

He nodded toward the door. From within came sounds—the voice of our passenger talking to himself in a high, thin, rising-and-falling whine. Syllables emerged from the patter, and made sense. A word here and there, a phrase.

"Why," I said, "that's Hebrew!"

"That's what I thought," said the Old Man. "Can you speak it?"

"I can understand it," I said. "Most of it, anyway. I speak Yiddish better."

"Good!" grunted the skipper. "Come in here."

He ushered me before him into the compartment. For the first time I got a real look at our unwilling guest. He

was a queer-looking duck. Lean and hot and angry-looking, with great smoldering eyes that made you want to crawl when he turned them on you. Not with fear or disgust. With something else. I don't know just what it was. A sort of—well awe, maybe. That's the closest I can come to it. A feeling that if you didn't watch your step, something pretty terrible was going to happen to you.

He had coal-black hair to match his eyes, and wore a straggly beard that accentuated rather than minimized the acid-bitter thinness of his lips. His high cheekbones had a consumptive flush, and his nostrils were pinched.

He looked like someone I'd seen once, somewhere, but couldn't remember who it was, or where, or when.

His chanting wail stopped abruptly when we entered, and he cringed, frightened but defiant. Like a trapped animal, I thought.

The skipper said, "Speak to him, Jake."

I said, "Hyah, pall"

"In Hebrew."

"Oh!" I said, and took a whack at it. It was heavy going, because I'd forgotten a lot. I said, "Greetings! My name is Levine, Jacob Levine. Can you understand what I am saying?"

Could he! His sultry eyes lighted, and he burst into a torrent of words.

"What is he saying?" asked the skipper.

"Too much," I complained, "and too fast," I said in Hebrew. "You must speak more slowly."

He cut his motors a few hundred thousand r.p.m., and at a more moderate tempo I began to catch his drift. He was, he declared, a humble man, and we were the mighty ones whom he feared. He was too meek and miserable a mortal to be the victim of our wrath. He kissed our feet and begged that he be freed. If we loosed him, he would sing our praise forever.

"Well?" asked the Old Man.

"Sweet talk," I said. "He's scared stiff."

"What's his name?"

I passed along the query, and got a tongueful of polysyllables that would have sunk a freighter. It was one of those old-fashioned family-tree monickers-so-and-so, son of so-and-so, son of somebody else, ad infinitum. When I tried to pass it along to the Old Man, he shrugged.

"Tell him we'll call him Johnny for short. Where did he come from? Was he on one of the evacuation ships?"

No, he had been on a merchantman.

Had his ship been sunk in last night's raid?

Raid? He had seen no raid, neither last night nor any night. He was a humble man, unworthy of our attentions. He wished but to be freed . . .

Then where *had* he come from? What was his ship, and where had it sailed from? Whither bound?

I relayed his answer to the Old Man. "His ship was the *Warrior King*, Tarshish, bound out of Joppa with a cargo of salt, wine and linens."

"Joppa?" frowned the skipper. "That would be Jaffa, near Jerusalem. But Tarshish? Perhaps he means Tarsus, in Turkey? But that's not a seaport. Oh, well, it doesn't matter. How long has he been floating around on that raft?"

"Three days," I learned from our passenger.

"Then he wasn't shipwrecked last night. Is your wireless working, Sparks?"

"To tell you the truth, sir, I don't know. Everything's happened so fast, and we've been under silence—"

"Yes, of course. Well, get it working and contact Larnaca for an index report on the—what was it?—*Warrior King*. If the registry is Allied or neutral, I suppose this old fellow is harmless."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Right away, sir."

"Oh, and before you go, tell our friend he's in no danger. That we're not going to eat him." The Old Man chuckled.

I translated the message. The results were—well,

astonishing, to say the least! Old whiskers loosed a little bleat of gratitude, then hopped up from his squat and hurled himself at the Old Man's feet, bowing and slobbering as if the skipper were on a pedestal or something.

The Old Man backed away, startled and embarrassed.

"I say, old chap! You needn't be so blasted . . . look out! Careful, there! Oh, *damn it!* Damn it all!"

He glared fretfully at his right hand, bleeding from a long and nasty gash. Retreating from Johnny, he'd snagged it on a bolthead and ripped it open from forefinger to wrist. He clamped a handkerchief to the cut, swearing magnificently.

"Lock him in again, Sparks. I've got to take this to the medico. Carry on!" And he left.

I said to Johnny savagely, "Now, see? You caused that!"

I expected a torrent of apologies and denials, but I was wrong. Johnny just stood there, his lips ashen, his eyes bleak and haunted. He whispered mournfully, "Yes . . . I know. I know . . ."

Well, I went to the radio room and warmed up the tubes. Then confidently, because a quick examination indicated everything to be shipshape, I twisted the verniers to see who was saying what on which cycles.

Nothing happened.

I got my tools and went trouble-shooting. I found one loose connection and a condenser that didn't test right. I fixed these, and tried again.

Nothing happened.

I tried the transmitter. It seemed to work. I rigged up a playback and crosschecked. Nothing wrong there. So I got out my blueprints and went over the whole set from aerial to ground, making any minor adjustments that seemed necessary. Then I tried once more.

And drew a blank.

I went to the skipper. I said, "I don't understand it, sir. If I were getting nothing at all, it would prove there's

something wrong with the set. But I *am* picking up static, so the receiver's operating. But I can't pick up any broadcasts, long or short wave."

The Old Man was mighty nice about it. "Don't worry about it, Sparks," he said. "It's probably something rather unusual, connected with our crash dive. Just keep working on it."

"But I can't raise Larnaca, sir."

"No matter. We'll be there in the morning. We'll make inquiries when we get there. By the way, you'll mess with me tonight."

I gulped. "Me, sir?"

The Old Man smiled. "Yes. I'm having Johnny as my guest, and I want you to act as interpreter. Will you?"

"Yes, *sir!*" I said.

"Johnny's on his way here now. I asked the second to go and fetch him. We'll—Good Lord, what's that?"

"That" was a series of thudding bumps just outside, followed by a sharp, agonized cry, then moans. We were out the door in a flash. The second lay groaning at the bottom of the companionway, his left leg doubled queerly under him. Johnny, standing over him, was wringing his hands and wailing frantic self-recriminations.

"It was my fault. I did it. I did it."

"Langdon!" cried the Old Man. "What happened?"

From between teeth clenched with pain came the answer. "I don't—know, sir. I must have slipped on the last step. It's my leg, sir."

"Did that man shove you?" I cried angrily.

"No. Of course not. It was just an accident."

But Johnny's stricken moaning did not cease. "It was my fault," he cried over and over. "I did it. I . . ."

From now on, I can't explain the rest of my story. All I can do is tell it, and let you write your own ticket. It's strange. It's mad. It's impossible. But . . .



We arrived at Cyprus in the morning. And I put it that way deliberately. The skipper had said we would reach Larnaca in the morning, but we didn't. We reached the spot where Larnaca should have been. And it wasn't there!

That doesn't make sense? It didn't make sense to us, either. It was a fine, bright, sunny morning. When we eased into the rounded harbor that should have been jammed with refugee ships, should have been aglitter with all the panoply and bustle of a British naval base, we stared incredulously at a narrow strip of beach rimmed by a few dilapidated fishing shacks.

Four of us were topside—the skipper, the third, Johnny and myself. When we stared into that yawning, desolate basin, the third cried uncomprehendingly. “But—there's something wrong. I *can't* have made a mistake, sir!”

The Old Man took the sextant from the third's hands. He shot the blazing sun with painstaking care. Then he stood for a long moment, gnawing his lips, his eyes gray and distant. Finally, “Mr. Graves?” he said.

“Yes, sir?”

“You will change our course, please. We are going to the mainland.”

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

The mate vanished below, obviously relieved that he had been spared a dressing-down. I said hesitantly, “Are we very far from Larnaca, sir?”

The Old Man said in a curious, strained voice. “I don't know, Sparks. Possibly *you* can tell *me*. Which is the farther—a million miles, or a million years?”

“I'm afraid I don't understand, sir.”

“No,” he said slowly. “Nor I.”

“But you said something about the mainland?”

“Yes. We're going to land our passenger back where he belongs. That much, if nothing else.”

“How long will it take, sir? A couple of hours?”

"I wish to God it would," said the Old Man tightly, "but I fear not. When did we pick up Johnny?"

"Why, yesterday morning, sir."

"Exactly," sighed the skipper. "So it will take us two days to reach the mainland."

To tell the truth, I thought the Old Man had slipped his moorings. The Lebanse mainland is not more than five hours from the island of Cyprus. But the skipper was right! It took us two full, nerve-wracking days to reach a coast we should have made easily before sundown.

First the motors conked out. Then, when the chief got them turning again, the electrical system went haywire. Generators spitting and sparking like firecrackers, for no apparent reason. When that was repaired, one of the bulkheads started oozing suspicious drops, and we had to heave to and jury-rig patches before the leak got worse.

Those were the major difficulties. There were more minor ones than I can enumerate. Working on the damaged motors, one of the engineering crew lost half a finger. One of the oilers came down with a fever—a malarial fever, for Pete's sake, smack in the middle of an inland sea! Then something whipped up for mess by Auld Rory must have come from a tainted tin, for on the second morning half the crew turned green and started upchucking all over the place.

Oh, it was a sweet voyage! Bad luck seemed to have taken over the *Grampus* in a big way.

Somehow, my private luck held, except for the fact that our passenger, finally recovered from his initial fear, had turned into a human question box. From morning to night he pounded my ear with questions. What was this vessel upon which we traveled, he wanted to know, this wondrous vessel which rode at will on or below the waters?

It was a submarine, I told him.

A submarine? And what was a submarine?

The *Grampus*, I told him. The *Grampus* was a submarine. Now go sit in the corner and croon lullabies, Pop!

Aie, what marvels! The *Grampus* was a submarine. So be it! But what was a grampus?

I knew the answer to that one, too, having looked it up in an encyclopedia when I was assigned to the ship.

"A grampus," I said, "is a type of dolphin, sometimes known as the killer whale because of its fighting habits and deadliness. Not a bad name for this crate, Pop. We've done a bit of killing already, and we'll do more, as soon as we get patched up for another crack at the Nazis."

He said solemnly, "You make war upon the evil ones?"

"You can say that again," I told him grimly. "They think they've got us licked, but we've just begun to fight. Our day is coming—and soon."

He wanted to know what we fought with, then, and I got a chance to show him, because this quiz program went on during one of the blowtorch-and-hammer sessions, and the Old Man had decided to let the gun crew fire a few trial bursts while we were hove to, just to keep their hands in. With his permission, I took old Johnny topside to watch.

He stared, with sagging jaw, as they stripped the gun and loaded it. And when it fired, belching a gout of flame amidst a roar of thunder, he practically went out of his head. He cut for the rail, and if I hadn't clutched his tattered nightgown, he'd have been back in the drink again, only without a raft.

Anyhow, that quenched his curiosity. He was glad to get back to his own quarters and stay there. Which gave me an opportunity to work some more on my incomprehensibly mute receiver.

I was going over my circuits for the 'teenth time when

the skipper wandered in and stood there watching quietly. At last he said, "No luck, eh, Sparks?"

"Skipper," I said flatly, "there's *no* luck aboard this ship any more. Here or elsewhere."

"I know what you mean, Jake," he nodded. "It's almost as if we were hoo-dooed, isn't it? Jinxed?"

"It is, sir. I'm not superstitious, but—"

"Nor am I," said the skipper, "but I'm curious. I wonder if . . . Sparks, you've studied electrical transmission. Tell me something, will you? Just what *is* electricity?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, sir. Nobody can tell you that. No one knows."

"Electronics," mused the Old Man. "In the theory of electronics, isn't there something about electrons being in two different places simultaneously?"

I said slowly, "I remember something sir, vaguely. Niles Bohr, I think. An electron moving from one cycle to another without ever having been in the space between. But I never could understand it, and I never tried. I'm no scientist. I just work with the equipment the smart guys invent." I stared at him. "But why do you ask, sir? Is it—"

"Just curious," repeated the skipper. "Perhaps the answer lies there, somehow. But it doesn't matter. We can't do anything about it. Just wait and see what we find when we reach the mainland."

"But I don't understand, sir," I said. "What are you expecting to find?"

But he didn't answer me. He just stood there in the doorway sucking at his cold pipe, staring through me off into space. On the morning of the fifth day after our flight from Alex, we sighted the mainland. It was a dull, gray, nasty morning, lowering with thick blankets of black cumulus that threatened to split at the seams any moment. The dim roll of thunder growled threat of a storm to come as once again the skipper, Johnny and I stood on the weather deck. There were two seamen,

too, waiting till the Old Man should give the expected orders.

"Well," said the skipper, "this is it. In a few minutes we'll be as close in as we dare go. Then we'll put him ashore, Sparks."

I said, "But didn't the third set course for Beyrouth, sir?"

"Yes."

"There are docks there. We won't have to lay off shore, sir."

"Really?" The Old Man gave me a faint smile. "I wonder, Sparks. I hope you're right, but—" he gestured, as briefly the dark overcast lifted, giving us a glimpse of the shoreline we approached—"but, you see, you're wrong."

It was Larnaca all over again. There was no naval base at Beyrouth, but I knew it to be a modern Near Eastern metropolis, doubly astir nowadays with war activity. And the drowsy little village I beheld was far from modern. No building on its shoreline was more than one story in height, the few ships in its inlet were shallow-draft wooden vessels of single-span canvas or none.

I said, "Skipper, I think I know what's wrong now. There's only one possible explanation. Your sextant's gone haywire, that's the trouble—"

"No," said the Old Man, "there's another explanation. Don't you see, Sparks? Don't you *see*?" Then, shrugging as I just stared at him blankly: "Ah, well! Let's not delay. Tell Johnny good-by for me, will you?"

I turned to the old geezer, who had been watching the coast draw nearer with a kindling tenseness in his gaze. I touched his skinny shoulder, and he started.

"Well, Johnny, this is it. We're putting you off now."

He nodded. "So be it. I am yours to command."

"Anything else, sir?" I asked the skipper.

"Nothing else, Sparks. What is to be, will be."



I turned to Johnny. "I guess that's all," I said. "Except a private word on my own hook, Pop. The skipper's sure you're okay, or he wouldn't be turning you loose this way. I don't know, myself. We don't know whether you came off a friendly or an enemy ship. And you've had the run of the *Grampus* for three days. You've seen a lot more than a civilian's supposed to see."

"I am a meek and miserable servant," said Johnny, slipping into the old routine of formal, stilted phraseology, "unworthy of the wonders that have been shown me—"

"Yeah, I know. And you're a gone goose if you go back and spill what you've learned. Understand? We know who you are, and if you turn out to be on *their* side, we'll come and get you. Is that clear?"

Johnny's strange, fanatic eyes gleamed. "I hear and obey," he said strongly. "So be it, I gird my loins to battle the forces of evil by your side."

"Okay," I said. "Then—so long, and good luck!"

I gave him my hand to shake, but the idiot didn't. Instead, he crouched and kissed it. I yanked it away, embarrassed, glancing at the skipper swiftly. But the Old Man simply sighed and nodded, almost as if that were what he expected. He spoke to the snickering seamen.

"Very well, lads."

They lifted Johnny into the inflated raft we were scooting him off in, and shoved him off. The sea was high and choppy. The Old Man nodded. "Oil, lads."

The boys broke loose a canister, smoothing a patch around the *Grampus* and the life raft. Johnny moved away slowly, and we watched him go until the skipper said abruptly, "It's raining, lads. We'd better go below."

The first fat drops of rain turned swiftly to a driving sheet as we ran to the tower. The closing hatch dulled the rumbling drums of thunder. The Old Man frowned.

"Sad old beggar! I hope he makes it to shore before he's waterlogged!"

He moved to the periscope, cranked it around to cover Johnny's passage.

"Can you see him, sir?" I asked. "Is he—"

"He's made it. He's landing now. I see people . . . God!"

The Old Man shouted, covered his eyes with his hands, and fell away from the periscope blindly. I cried, "What is it, sir? What—"

Then my voice caught in my throat, even as I put out a hand. For the *Grampus* was humming . . . yes, *humming!* . . . with a wild outré cacophony of sound unlike anything I've ever heard. A weird tingling burned through my veins, and black vertigo danced before my eyes. I couldn't breathe; I couldn't stir. I seemed to be rising . . . falling . . . turning . . . dropping through unfathomable depths of burning blackness to a screaming emptiness . . .

As suddenly as it had started, it ended. And the Old Man's voice was croaking in my ear.

"God! Sparks, are you all right?"

"Yes, sir," I faltered. "I think so, sir. What was it? What happened?"

"Lightning. A direct smash, forward. I thought for a moment it had blinded me. Look!"

He gestured to the eyepiece of the periscope. I looked—and drew back. The sea about us was in flames from the lightning burst igniting the oil. I suddenly remembered Johnny. I said, "The poor old bloke! He must think we've been burned to a crisp."

"Or," said the skipper, "that we disappeared in a sea of flame."

I gaped at him stupidly.

"Look again, Sparks. Beyond the fire. The shore."

I looked. The flames were gone. The storm clouds had vanished, and the sky was crystal blue. There was a patrol-ship racing toward us, a bone of froth in its teeth, the Union Jack astern. White, modern buildings rimmed

a harbor abristle with docks and quays, the glory of a modern seaport. The city was Beyrouth!

I said, "But—but I don't understand, sir! How did we get here?"

The Old Man said, quietly, "When the patrol arrives, Sparks, I will tell them we had trouble and drifted off our course. I dare not tell them the truth. They'd never understand. No more than you do—or I do."

"Understand what, sir?"

"Where we have been," said the Old Man, "or when. I'm not sure I can explain, Sparks. Perhaps there's a clear and logical explanation. Possibly you were right about the sextant; we misjudged our position off Cyprus. And maybe we were all insensible for a few minutes after that lightning struck the ship. I don't know. Maybe we've been laying off this harbor for an hour."

"But the village we saw?"

"Dimly, through a brief rift in the fog. There is such a thing as a mirage."

I said, "You don't really believe that, sir. You're just rationalizing."

He groped for his pipe and pouch, steadying shaken nerves with old, familiar movements. "Yes, Sparks, I am. Logic rejects what I *really* believe."

"And that is, sir?"

"Suppose electricity were somehow connected with time? Then what?"

"With *time*, sir?"

"The present and the past," mused the Old Man, "and the future. Days and hours leaping like electrons from one place to another, without ever having passed through intervening space. A bomb scored a near miss on the *Grampus*, and everything was strangely changed. Lightning struck us—and we have returned to our proper era."

"You mean we've been in the—"

"The past—yes." The skipper's pipe was lighted now, and with its indrawn fragrance he relaxed. He smiled

at me. "It does make sense that way, Jake. If I were a better Christian and you a better Jew, we might have understood earlier. Think! Doesn't our passenger remind you of anyone?"

"He always did," I acknowledged. "From the moment I first laid eyes on him. But I can't seem to— wait a minute! Now I remember. An old rabbi I knew when I was a kid. A fiery old man, like an ancient prophet."

"Your wireless worked, but received nothing. Suppose there was nothing to receive?"

"Skipper, I—"

"There was a man," said the skipper softly, "who set forth from Joppa to Tarshish to escape the service of the Lord. But where he traveled, punishment pursued him. And his shipmates rose against him, casting him adrift..."

The small hairs tingled on my neck, and a coldness crept up my spine. I was remembering the stories now—the old, old stories told by taper-light, and the liquid cadence of the cantor's voice.

The skipper said, "Three days, Jake. He was three days our passenger aboard the *Grampus*. And you told him what a grampus is."

"His name?" I whispered.

"We called him Johnny," sighed the skipper. "The nearest English equivalent to the first part of his long name. But his real name, Sparks, was..."

Heed ye! 'Ware and repent, I cry, and  
sue Their mercy ere it be too late; this  
do I bid and warn. For I have dwelt  
amongst Them; mine eyes have seen with awe  
Their strength and righteous anger.  
These have I seen; yea, even I . . . Jonah of  
Gath-hephur, prophet of the Lord!

## THE CUNNING OF THE BEAST

*He will look upon  
Our crouching shame, may make us stand upright  
Burning in terror—O that it were night!*

There has been much disagreeable comment on the case of our late brother, the Yawa Eloem, and we number amongst us many who feel that the punishment meted out to him, severe as it was, still did not exact complete retribution for the evil he loosed in our midst.

It is with these vengeful ones I should like to take issue.

Now, let it not be thought that I view with approval the experiments of the learned and unhappy Doctor Eloem. The reverse is true; being one of his oldest friends and earliest confidants, I was perhaps the first to warn him against doing that which he did. This warning I delivered on the night of the Yawa conceived his staggering ambition.

But to those who contend that his intention was to overthrow our great civilization, destroy our culture and turn the rulership of our beloved homeland into the hands of barbarian monstrosities, I feel I should present the true facts.

Doctor Eloem is more to be pitied than scorned. His was the sad fate of one who, delving into secrets better left unlearned, succeeded only in creating a monster mightier than its maker . . .

Well I remember the night the Yawa's dream was born.



It was the Night of Utter Black which occurs but once in each twelve revolutions of Kios. Both suns were set, and all nine moons were vanished from the sky. No doubt the burning stars shone true in the encircling jet vault of space, but from our Refuge they could not be seen. Great clouds hung thickly to our shielding Dome; against its transparent hemisphere torrents of corrosive rain lashed in unending fury.

Though our shelters were warmed and kept dry for just such times as these, my body creaked and groaned when I tried to move; one limb was so stiffened in its socket that I could scarcely will it to function. Eloem was in better condition, having but recently completed a rehabilitation at the Clinic, but the condensation affected his vision, and time and again as we huddled there in misery he wiped the moisture from his visor.

Dimly we heard the thud of running feet, and peering fearfully into the mists we saw our friend Nesro, who had been caught in the deadly storm and was belatedly racing to shelter. But even before we could call him to our Dome he fell prey to the cursed climate. His footsteps faltered; his joints locked; he stumbled and fell headlong.

A horror gripped us. For a Kiosian to lie for more than minutes on that drenched ground meant certain ending. But we were helpless. To attempt a rescue without shedders would only put us in the same plight.

Eloem lurched to his feet, and what he cried should convince his enemies that, whatever else his faults, he was no coward.

"Courage, Nesro," he cried. "We are coming."

But in answer to his words came a cry from the fallen Nesro.

"No, comrades! It is better *one* should end than many." His voice was feeble. "Open the Refuge. I shall try to make it without my carrier."

We screamed in unison then, "No, Nesro . . . no! You can't possibly make it! The pelting death—"

But our pleas were vain. Desperately Nesro scurried from the rain-glistening cover of his carrier, flashed toward us flaming like a pillar of crimson in the darkness. For an instant it seemed his madness might be crowned with success . . . but only for an instant. Then the raw and dreadful poison of the rain seeped through his feeble shield. A high, thin scream of pain rent our nerves, and where Nesro had been, briefly there blossomed in the night a white incandescence unbearable to look at. Then . . . nothing.

So ended Nesro. I was moved, but my emotion was as naught compared to that of my friend, the learned Yawa Eloem. He moaned, and there in our tiny Refuge cursed aloud, speaking Names which I dare not repeat.

"Now, woe and despair," he cried terribly, "upon the mocking gods who made us the weaklings we are! For we are at once masters of a world and cringing servants to that world's every element. What matter that our intellect has built for us an empire, or that with wit and wisdom we have plumbed the secrets of a universe? Our minds are living glories, but we hobble about our kingdom like cripples, poorest of all we hold in fee. Even those wild, breathing beasts who grub for worms beneath the stones dare face the forces which strike us low. Even such miserable clods as *that*—"

And he pointed a shaking hand toward the rain-soaked carrier abandoned by Nesro. It lay face down in a wind-lashed rivulet, motionless, rusting, ruined beyond repair. As we watched, there scampered from the woods a small air-breather. The furry creature sniffed hopefully about the carrier. Then, scenting nothing wherewith to sate its revolting appetite, it shuffled off, rain dripping from its pelt.

I shuddered and asked reasonably, "But surely, Eloem, you would not barter your soul for the brute body of such

a beast? True, the gods have ordained that we must pay a price for our mastery. We lack the physical stamina of those lower animals. But is not our superior intellect compensation enough?

"And as for form and substance, we have made great progress. Our forefathers knew not how to build themselves tangible bodies. Today we encase ourselves in cleverly wrought metal carriers which perform all physical functions for us."

"Bah!" spat the Yawa savagely. "Carriers which but accentuate our impotence. We garb ourselves in shells of forged metal, and fancy we have gained mobility. But is this true? No! We have succeeded only in making ourselves slaves to the bodies we have wrought—" He laughed hollowly, mocking the chatter of the Clinic specialists—"Grease here . . . grease there . . . a drop of oil in the knee-joint. Replace lens . . . replace digits . . . repair rusted plate in frontal lobe—"

"Still," I protested, "our metal bodies *do* enable us to get about more easily, perform tasks otherwise impossible."

"And under what handicap?" he thundered. "In cold weather we shiver and tremble in our mental homes; in hot, our yielding rivets warp and melt. In dry weather our joints lock with grating sand. In wet—" He paused and stared bitterly at the empty carrier of Nesro—"we perish."

I said resignedly, "What you say is true. But there is nothing to be done about it. I, for one, am content—"

"But *I* am not! There must be *some* way of living other than huddling pitifully caged in a metal carkase. There must be *some* other form of servant—"

He stopped abruptly, and I stared at him curiously.

"Yes?"

"Servant," he repeated. "Yes, that's it! Another kind of servant. One which does not melt in the heat and freeze in the cold, shrivel in drouth and rot in the rain. A servant

by Nature adapted to combat Nature's terrors. *That is what our race needs; what we must have . . . will have!*"

"But where will you find such a servant?"

The Yawa Eloem pointed a creaking arm to the mist-shrouded forest. "Out there, my brother."

"In the forest? You mean—"

"Yes. The creatures of flesh. The air-breathers."

I laughed. Despite my pain and misery, I laughed. It was just too ridiculous, the concept of training those tiny furry beasts to perform for us our manual tasks.

"Oh, come now, Eloem, you can't be serious. Those miserable, dwarfed weaklings?"

"Bear within them," he said slowly, shrewdly, "the seed of animate life. That is all that matters, my friend. The germ of life. Their size, their form . . . such things are unimportant. These I will mold to meet our requirements. I will raise them from all fours, refashion their brute brains to give them intellect. Yes, even this, I, the Yawa Eloem, shall do. And I so pledge unto the gods."

A strange uneasiness filled me, I knew not quite why. I said thoughtfully, "Have a care, O Yawa, lest these same gods take offense at your intent. I am no carping sophist, but it seems to me there are certain limits beyond which one may not go without too greatly daring. The altering of form, the giving of wisdom, these are feats which only the gods may accomplish with impunity. It is not for ones like thee and me—"

But I fear the Yawa did not hear my words. Too intent was he on the vision that had come to him. There in the wet and the darkness beside me he stirred, and his voice was rapt and strident with a dream.

"Yes, this shall I do," he proclaimed. "I shall build a new race, a race of servants obedient to us, their masters."

Many time-periods passed ere next I saw the Yawa Eloem. We of Kios are a recluse race, separate by nature and individual in our working habits, and I was busy

with duties of my own. The Grand Council had commissioned me to perfect a form of craft wherein our colonists might hurdle the darkness of space to the yet unconquered planets of our double sun. With this tremendous labor was I occupied.

So the moons waxed and waned. Thrice changed the seasons, warm and cold, and wet and dry and wet again. And in the privacy of his own domed laboratory the Yawa Eloem pursued his secret labors in solitude.

And then one double twilight, when the crimson rays of the smaller sun sinking in the north merged weird shadows with the pale green luminescence of the greater sun's southern setting, there came to me in my workshop the Yawa.

Excitement was strong within him, and he cried without preface of formal greeting, "My friend, would you behold a marvel to strike awe into the boldest heart?"

"Why, who would not?" I laughed.

"Then come!" cried the Yawa intently. "Then come with me and wonder and behold!"

And he led the way to his own Dome . . .

Let me say that never dwelt a scientist amidst such great refinement as that with which Eloem had surrounded himself. His Dome comprised no *single* chamber, as is the case with most of us; his was a mighty structure subdivided into numerous rooms and niches, each dedicated to its own purpose.

Once we passed through a chemical laboratory, its shelf-lined walls aglisten with innumerable rows of vials and beakers; again we crossed a library whose musty tomes spanned the whole range of living knowledge; elsewhere sprawled chambers filled with electrical apparatus, surgical equipment and curious machines of which I could not even guess the purpose. I recall traversing a steaming room wherein was sunk a hydroponic tank whence emanated an oddly noisome scent. I cannot



speaking with surety of what this tank contained, but I do recall that as we passed, from its oily depths there flopped a strange, amorphous something which scrabbled with nailless paws at the walls of its prison and bubbled piteous plaints in a voice of tongueless horror.

But past all these, his chambers of experiment, the Yawa led me swiftly until we came at last to the furthestmost door. Before this he paused for an instant dramatically. And then:

"Here," he proclaimed, "is my final testing chamber. Here the fulfillment of my great invention."

He flung open the door and bade me enter.

Well might the Yawa glory in what he here had wrought. For frankly do I confess that my eyes, following the motion of his hand, widened in astonishment at what they beheld.

This was no mere room. It was a vast Dome-covered acreage, formed to the semblance of a veritable living forest. Nay, more than forest; say rather a garden spot, a paradise. For its growth was as various as any wrought by Nature. Yet with such thought had the Yawa Eloem conceived and carried out its purpose that here he had brought into being a landscape more beautiful than ever was sown by Nature's heedless hand.

Here a high grove cast towering green spires upward; there, through mossy banks bedecked with fragrant flowers, purled a tiny crystal brooklet; elsewhere, rimmed by lush meadows, sprawled lazy hills and flatlands ripe with grain. Small beasts stirred in the forests, their restless murmurings a balm to weary spirits; fish flashed and rippled in the eddies of the stream; and from some distant grove came the thrilling cadence of birdsong raised in joy.

I stared at Eloem, stunned with wonderment. "It is," I cried aloud, "it is indeed a miracle you have created here, wise Yawa! What beauty and what charm! The Grand Council will be astonished."

"You think so?" he asked, pleased at my praise. "You really think so?"

"How could they be otherwise? By the gods, Eloem, would that the whole of our planet were as delightful as this small niche you have created beneath your laboratory Dome. What joy would be ours, what wonderful existence, if all Kios were such a garden spot as this; a shielded wonderland wherein we might dwell without fear of the natural terrors which beset us . . . heat and cold, drouth and murderous rainfall.

"You said you would awe me, my friend. You have succeeded beyond your wildest imaginings. I humble myself before a master artist who has created perfection."

"But," said the Yawa, "you have not seen all."

"There is *more* to see?"

"Much more. Not yet have you seen the greatest of my accomplishments. Come."

And he led the way down a tiny path curving through the wilderness. As we neared a grove deep-nestled in the rolling hills he called in gentle tones, "My son! My son! Where art thou, child of my making?"

And before I could question this strange salutation a movement broke the silence of the glade. Branches parted, and from a leafy bower stepped a vision which stunned and left me speechless.

It was a living creature, an animal of flesh and blood, an air-breather walking upright on its two hind limbs. Truly had Eloem boasted he would mold a creation in his own image. So closely did its shape resemble that of the carriers which we of Kios build for our own usage that for an instant I believed it a gigantic hoax. I thought Eloem to amuse me had coated the carrier of a friend or assistant with pigment.

Then I saw this monster's body was not forged of sturdy metals like our own, but was soft, pulsating, resilient. The curious dark growth of fur which covered its

head, its breast and its limbs grew naturally, it seemed, from its very flesh. It breathed with great gulping motions of the chest, and its wide, natural optics were not sensitive visors such as those through which *we* see, but were the natural eyes of animals.

These now shifted from one to the other of us in mute appraisal as the sensate beast asked, "Yes, my lord? You called me?"

Eloem, his voice benevolent and warm as that of a parent asked, "Where hast thou been, my son?"

The creature replied quietly, "I wandered through the fields, my nostrils savoring the fragrance of the flowers. I walked amongst the trees and touched them, marveling at their strong, rough firmness. Beside the brook I knelt and drank of its waters. I tasted the berries of the vines and the fruit of the trees, and gave thanks unto thee, O my lord, who brought these things into being and myself unto this paradise."

"And art thou happy, my son?"

"Happy?" The beast's blank stare questioned the very meaning of the word.

"Lack you anything for which your heart hungers?"

"Nay, nothing, lord. Save perhaps—"

The Yawa's creation hesitated. His voice stopped, his eyes fell, as if he were abashed at his own temerity in questioning the perfection of this garden.

Eloem demanded, "Then there *is* something, my child?"

"There is . . . one small thing, my lord. It is scarce worth mentioning, but—" The creature shuffled in embarrassment—"I am lonely, O Yawa. I walk at evening in the cool of the garden, seeing about me the bright colored birds, the rustling insects and the beasts of the fields, and lol for each of these there is one to be companion. Only I, of all the creatures who inhabit this paradise, am mateless."

"But—" frowned Eloem.

"I question not thy bounty, O great Yawa," said the creature hastily. "In thy infinite wisdom thou knowest best what shall be given thy servant. Still—"

He faltered to silence, head bowed servilely before the pondering Yawa. But I could not help noticing that his glance darted swiftly up from beneath shyly lowered lashes.

I said, with a touch of pique, I am afraid, "This is a strange being you have created, Eloem. Though he dwells in paradise, still he dares question the perfection thereof."

But Eloem said gently, slowly, "Nevertheless, there is wisdom in what he suggests. It was much effort to create this being. It were folly to attempt the creation of scores, hundreds, thousands of others like him in my laboratory. Perhaps in his innocent demanding he has offered the proper solution to this problem. A mate? But yes, of course! I need but create for him a mate and then—in the fullness of time—he and she shall produce for Kios the race of servants for which they were conceived.

"Very well, my son." He turned again to the waiting creature. "It shall be as you ask. On the morrow come to the room where first thou awakened. There, out of thy substance and my wisdom, shall I create a second like thyself, but of another sex. And now . . . farewell."

So left I Eloem's garden. But this time I did not allow so long a time to pass ere my returning. My curiosity was stirred, not only as to how the Yawa's magnificent experiment would turn out, but also as to what form of creature he would create to be his beast's companion. Moreover, when it was bruited about that I, alone of all Kios, had been invited to visit Eloem's laboratory, great interest was aroused and I was summoned before the Grand Council, there to report on that which I had seen.

In glowing terms I told them of the wonders he had wrought, and greatly did they marvel. Great Kron, who heads our Council, mused, "Intelligent life in fleshly form? But, yes! That is the answer to our problem. The Yawa Eloem is a sage spirit, and mighty is this thing he seeks to accomplish."

Another cried rapturously, "Now dawns the long-dreamed liberation of our race! When this new herd of servants has been bred, then will we of Kios be free to rid ourselves once and for all of the metal carriers in which we house ourselves. Secure beneath great Domes we may rest ourselves in easeful pursuit of pleasure and knowledge while our servants, not sensitive as we to climatic condition, carry out our instructions."

But still another, older than the rest, spoke dubiously.

"I do not know," he said. "This is, in truth, a mighty thing the Yawa has attempted. Perhaps it is *too* mighty. The gods in their omnipotence frown upon our seeking to delve too deeply into certain mysteries. And methinks already Eloem has tampered with a secret and occult lore . . . the creation of living souls."

"Souls?" laughed one of our younger councilors. "But how can there be souls in bestial bodies?"

"Where life alone exists, perhaps the soul is absent. But our brother has told us that this creature of Eloem's not only moves and obeys, but voices his own thoughts. That bespeaks intelligence. And where exists intelligence may also be a soul. If this be true—"

The speaker shook his head gravely. But the rest of us laughed. As we all knew, old Saddryn was ever a pessimist and a crier-of-woe.

Yet Kron in his infinite wisdom took heed of even this gloomy warning, and bade me continue my visits to Eloem's laboratory that I might keep the Council informed as to the progress of the experiment.



Thus it was that some short time later once again I strolled with the Yawa through his delightful garden.

As we neared the glade wherein it was the creature's custom to lurk, I sensed a subtle change. What it was I could not at first detect, whether of sight or sound or simply atmosphere. Then suddenly and with a sense of resharpened curiosity I realized what was different. When first I had strode this pathway, a part of its beauty had been in its fresh, untrammelled wildness of growth . . . the helter-skelter confusion of vines and trees and bushes, the lavish abundance with which bright flowers sprang from unexpected places, the haphazard delight of natural beauties seen amidst natural surroundings.

But now all that was changed. The pathway upon which we walked no longer twisted aimlessly beneath arboreal bowers. It had been carefully scraped and straightened; the rank brush flanking it had been trimmed to a semblance of order; the low and overhanging boughs had been cut back to allow the wanderer headroom. Beauty was still present, but no longer was it the clean, unspoiled improvisation of Nature; it was a neat and regimented orthodoxy, pleasing to the eye but somehow strangely stifling to the senses.

I commented on this to Eloem, and he smiled quietly.

"That," he said, "is the doing of the She. An orderly creature, that one!" And he shook his head with almost reluctant admiration.

"Her doing? Then you have finished her?"

"Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I finished two of them. The first one dwelt here with him for a while, but I had to—" he sighed—"remove her. She was too much like the He. Carefree, adventurous, enamored of gay wanderings and pleasant sloth, rather than earnestly intent upon her duties. They were more companions than mates. They laughed and played together throughout the livelong day and accomplished nothing. So I was

forced to create another She, one with instincts and desires unlike his own."

"But I should think," I demurred, "this would not be to his liking? After all, a companion is what he asked for."

The Yawa chuckled.

"What he *asked* for, but not what he really wanted. You should study psychology, my friend, to realize that in nature, even as in the electrical art, it is opposites which attract. This second She is so unlike him that he is drawn to her as by a magnet. She baffles and confuses him . . . and brings him running. She commands and he obeys; she demands and he fulfills. With a motion of a finger she exacts from him the most arduous labor. She is a bother to him, I fear, and a source of vexing trouble . . . but for her rare words of praise he has done more actual work than ever since I placed him in this garden."

"Then," I said, comprehending, "you followed the example of the insect? Made her larger than him, and stronger, that she might enforce her demands?"

"On the contrary," denied Eloem, "I made her . . . But see for yourself." And he called, "My children!"

The bower parted, and into its opening strode his twain creatures.

In a glance I saw it was as he said. The male beast was oddly changed. There was a new assurance in his features, a confidence which might have been born of his newfound capabilities. But there was at the same time a . . . a something else I could not quite decipher. It was a reserve, a furtiveness which had not been present when first I saw him. But more than this first glance I saw not, for my attention was drawn and riveted to the creature's new companion. And strange as it may seem, coming from one uncorporeal as myself, I must confess that even I was fascinated by this, the Yawa Eloem's latest creation.

For he had combined in her not only the sturdiness and the nobility of the male, but something subtler still; a grace, a charm, a winsomeness and allurements far out of proportion to the small physique with which he had endowed her.

Shorter by half a head was she than her mate, slighter of bone and more fragile, whiter of skin. One could tell at a glance that hers was strength not built of sinew but of purpose. She bore herself lightly, walking on the balls of her feet with lissom grace, and she seemed all sweet docility. Yet, curiously, she spoke for both.

"You called, my lord?" she asked. "What would you of us?"

"Naught," said the Yawa Eloem. "I wished but to see you, show you to my friend. You are happy here, my children?"

"Yes, my lord," said the She. "Of course, there are a few things—"

"Yes?" asked Eloem.

The male spoke querulously.

"She wants the streambed widened that we may swim therein. She thinks, too, that I should transplant berry bushes nearer to our glade that we need not hunt so far for provender. And we have talked—" he cast a dubious glance at his mate—"that is, *she* has talked much of our building some sort of dwelling."

"She?" laughed Eloem. "Always she? What is *your* desire in these matters, my firstmade?"

"Well—" said the male hesitantly.

"I have pointed out to him," interrupted the She in sweet and lilting tones, "that only by doing these things can we prove to the lesser beasts that we are their superiors and their rightful masters. It is true, my lord, is it not, that we *are* their masters?"

I asked impatiently, "Since when do beasts rule beasts?" but the Yawa silenced me with a gesture.

"There is logic to that. It is right and proper that one animal should exercise dominion over its inferiors. If your mate wants these things, I see no harm in your providing them for her."

"Oh, very well," said the male petulantly. "But it is wearisome work, which I like not. When the *other* She was here we roamed where we would for berries, swam at chance when we found a widening of the stream; we laughed and played and found no need of stifling shelter."

"Like," laughed the secondmade gayly and, I thought, perhaps a bit tauntingly, "like two happy and carefree children. All day they played, then in the dark of night they curled apart, each to his own soft nest of ferns, and slumbered in cool companionship. Of course—" And she laughed again, flexing her muscles smoothly, languorously; until that moment I had not realized how strong was the animal within her—"Of course, if *that* is what you want, the master can no doubt bring back the *other* She—"

But a swift light, warm and hungry, brightened in the male's eyes, and he shook his head.

"No," he decided, "I shall do as she asks, my lord."

"Very well," said Eloem. "It is your decision to make. And now farewell, my children. We must go."

But even as we turned the She addressed us, humble as ever and sweetly supplicating, but with a cunning determination nonetheless.

"Master—"

"Yes, my daughter?"

"There is another thing . . . another trifling thing. We are humble creatures, ignorant and unworthy of your attentions. We would not trouble you for counsel and advice on every tiny thing we wish to do. Is it not possible that when need arises we may be allowed to enter into the chamber wherein are stored the books of knowledge and learning? If we could but do this,

we need not waste time and effort learning to do things wrongly, but may build and create in proper fashion."

"Nol" said the Yawa Eloem. "No, my daughter, that is one thing you may *not* do. All this wide garden is open unto you; its hills and valleys, glades and rivulets. But there is one door through which you may not pass: that which leads to my private laboratory. This is the Law, and the only Law I have laid down unto you."

"But—" pouted the She enticingly.

"Let us speak of it no more," cried Eloem sternly. "You have heard my word. And now, goodbye."

So left we them standing there, he shrugging and resigned, she with head lowered. Yet as we left I felt her eyes upon us, shrewd and bold beneath their lowered lashes.

You may wonder, my brothers, why waste I so much wordage on the telling of this. Believe me, it is but to demonstrate that *never* did the Yawa Eloem—as has been accused by his detractors—conspire against our own race for the overthrow of our empire. Who says so speaks untruth. The Yawa came near to bringing disaster upon us, true; but only because, being the soul of righteousness himself, he could not comprehend the cunning of the beasts he had created . . .

From this point on you are familiar with the facts of the case. You know how on the Night of the Four Moons it was strangely noted that the laboratory Dome of Eloem glowed with the reflection of a ruddy flame throughout the evening. It is unfortunate that no investigation was made of this at the time, but it is understandable. We of Kios are a recluse of race, self-sufficient and solitary by nature. None knew that the Yawa was not in his laboratory, but was traveling afar in search of new equipment with which to stock his depleted stores.



All those of us, including myself, who maintain residence within sight of our brother's laboratory remember well the subsequent series of incidents emanating from that spot. Once the sound of explosion. Still another time the clamorous pounding of metal upon metal as if a dozen of us, carrier-clad, vied in games of strength.

But none knew or guessed the import of these sights and sounds.

Knowledge of dawning peril came to us only when one morn we wakened to discover the Dome of our neighbor Lato smashed and in smoldering ruins. When startled friends braved the wreckage to learn Lato's fate they were grieved to find Lato's carrier lying amidst the wreckage. When the headpiece was forced open it was found that Lato himself was ended. His volatile energy had been expended in a single gigantic burst of flame which fused the metal wherein he had maintained residence.

Even after this disaster no suspicion attached to Eloem's labors. And certainly none dreamed that his creations were in any way responsible. Not even when a few nights later the nearby Dome of the councilor Palimon was found to be rudely split and flooded with poisonous oxide of hydrogen was it guessed that the animals could be responsible for such a brutal attack upon their overlords.

Palimon was, of course, ended. His spirit seared and shriveled by the lethal liquid, he could tell us nothing. What dreadful tale of agony he might have related is better left unguessed.

And then, at fearful last, came revelation as to the cause of these disasters. This occasion was, as you will remember, the destruction of the Dome of the Grand Council itself. Like the other events, it occurred in the dark of night when no Kiosian dares venture forth, and horrible was its accomplishment.

First came, as had before, a violent explosion. Then

in its wake rose a fearful sea of flame, sweeping the council-hall and slaying all who dwelt beneath the Dome. And when blistering fire had gutted the ruined hemisphere, then came the dank night wind, bearing with it lethal rains to destroy such life as might remain within the halls.

It is by sheer chance that on this night scarce half the Council was foregathered, else might a blow have been struck from which our empire might never have recovered. But as it was, great Kron and half his Council had been in my Dome inspecting my new and nearly complete spacecraft. Shedder-garbed against the night mists, they were returning to their dwelling when the explosion trembled the ground beneath their feet. As they spurred their carriers to top speed, they—or I should say we, for I was with them—reached the scene in time to see outlined against the flickering flames two bodies. These, like our own, were carrier-clad, and at the sight of them Kron burst forth with a terrible cry.

"Traitors!" he roared. "Two of our own people . . . traitors! Now the gods forbend that I should live to see this awful day! Then the other explosions were *not* accidents; they were deliberate murder! Woe upon Kios that has spawned such vermin—"

Then I stopped him with a shrill, excited cry. For upon sight of us the two marauders had turned and raced away. And though the taller of these could not be told from one of our own brethren, by the pace and motion of the other—an awkward, gliding run—I recognized and knew the nature of our enemy.

"Nay, these are no children of Kios, O Kron," I cried, "but the beasts . . . the beasts of the Yawa Eloem, turned like serpents against their masters!"

Great Kron cried loud in his thunderous rage, then turned he to the royal messenger. "Gavril," he ordered,

"sound now your trumpet over all the land. Bid Eloem here instantly. Mikel, arouse your troops!"

And then I knew the fury of great Kron, for not in a score of centuries had the gleaming troops of Mikel been ordered into action. But without a word the commander of our armed forces turned and sped toward the armory wherein are carefully stored against the hour of need those dreadful weapons which our race holds ever in reserve.

What happened next, you know. The Yawa, being summoned, came immediately. Nor waited he even upon the slow movements of his mechanical carrier. Risking the night mists and the dark, with the speed of light he flashed from the other end of the land in his natural form. We saw him approach from afar, a pillar of flame in the darkness.

When he learned what had befallen, a cry of pain and anguish broke from him. Like a patient parent he might have denied the evil intent of his children were not the proof of their mischief a smoldering wreckage before him.

Then said Kron, "Now great is the evil your creations have wrought, O Yawa. But greater still shall be their punishment. For even now our warriors sweep forth to destroy them."

But the Yawa pleaded, "Wait, O Kron! Stay your hand till I have learned what lust inspired this evil. Let me go to my children and learn from their lips the reason for this deed."

And Kron nodded.

"So be it. But be swift."

Eloem turned to me beseechingly.

"You, my friend? Will you come with me?"

So, for the last time, together went we two into the paradise which the Yawa had created beneath his Dome.

Within, the paths were cool, the grottoes shadowed, and the soft brook purled through mossy silences. No songbird sang, but from the thicket came the soft and lazy cadences of restless insects. Together but alone, unspeaking, we trod the paths marked out by the He and She. And as we neared the glade wherein it was the creatures' wont to dwell, the Yawa Eloem raised his voice in stern command . . . but in sadness, too, I thought.

It is perhaps meaningful that in this hour of sorrow he should have called only to the first of his creations.

"My son!" he called. "My son! Where art thou, O child of mine own making?"

There came no answer but the rippling of the breeze through the boughs, the rustling of a frightened thing in the high grass.

"My son," cried Eloem again. "Where art thou? Know you not the voice of your lord and maker?"

Then suddenly, a dim whiteness in the shadows, rose the crouching figure of the He from the brush before us. And I saw with sick horror that he was not, as ever before, clad only in his own fleshly raiment, but that his body was shielded within the greaved and bucklered harness of a carrier such as we ourselves wear.

He spoke, and his voice was meek.

"You called, my lord?"

The Yawa's voice was stricken.

"My son, my son!" he grieved. "And wherefore hast thou donned this raiment?"

The male's voice was a thick mumbling in the darkness. He spoke in half apology, half defiance.

"It was the She, my lord. She told me I was naked and a weakling, and I was ashamed. Together we built these garments that we might be strong and mighty."

"Built?" repeated Eloem. "Built those garments? But where, O creature of little knowledge, learned you the secret of such things?" Then in a tone of sudden under-

standing, "You learned this not in the garden, my son, but . . . elsewhere."

The beast shuffled miserably. "It was the She, my lord," he whined. "It was the She who—"

Then cried the Yawa in a terrible voice, "Let the She stand forth!"

And suddenly she was there, rising from the thicket beside her mate. She too was garbed in a metal carrier, but her headpiece was removed, and never thought I to see such boldness in the eyes of a creature bred to serfdom. On her features was scorn; on her lips pride, anger, and rebellion.

She cried defiantly, "Yea, even I, my lord. It was I who showed the He how to build the garments. I, too, who read the books and learned the secret of making the flame which explodes, the fire that destroys, of smashing the Masters' Domes, that the night-waters might seep in and end them."

"These things," said the Yawa in awful tones, "you could learn in but one place. In my library, which was forbidden to you. But how entered you there? The door was locked and bolted."

The male creature shifted nervously.

"There was a grill in the door, O Master," he explained. "Through this the She sent our friend the serpent with instructions to unlock the portal to us."

The Yawa trembled with an awesome rage, and his voice was like the rolling of great thunders.

"Now cursed be you!" he cried. "For you have defied my commands, and in opening the forbidden gate tasted the fruits of evil knowledge I forbade you! And cursed be the serpent who aided your rebellion. May he be eyed with endless loathing by all who spring from your loins in countless generations to come! For surely I say unto you, never shall it be forgotten what you have this night done . . . neither by yourselves, nor



by your children, nor by your children's children's children unto the end of time.

"Here—" and his voice broke with the intensity of his passion—"here did I build for you a garden of wondrous beauty, a paradise wherein was all for which your hearts might hunger. But it was not enough. You would escape its walls and set yourselves up as masters even over those who created you. Henceforth I rid my heart of you. You are a broken reed, an experiment which failed. I disclaim myself of you and your beast-born ambitions.

"Mikell" And he called to the warrior captain who now, with gleaming sword held high, had appeared at the gate of the garden. "Do what you must, Mikell"

But Mikel said quietly and with great sorrow, "My orders have been changed, O brother Eloem."

"Changed?"

"Yes. Kron has decided that mere ending is not a fitting punishment for that which these creatures have done."

"But," I gasped, "if not ending, then what?"

It was Kron himself who answered.

"According to our laws, O Yawa Eloem, it is forbidden that any living creature with a soul be brought by our hands to mortal ending. And in council sage have we decided that by their very rebellion have these creatures proven the existence of their souls.

"Yet since we must rid ourselves of their evil presence, there is one solution. They shall be placed in the spacecraft recently completed by our friend here, and transported across the everlasting darkness of space to such bourne as may be farthest removed from our own planet. Where this journey may end I cannot say nor guess, but somewhere may be another planet where you and your ill-spawned experiments can exist beyond our ken

and finding until the gods, in the fullness of their mercy, see fit to rule otherwise."

The Yawa Eloem whispered shakily, "Not only they, but . . . myself?"

And said great Kron sadly, "Even so. For was it not you, O Yawa, who brought them into being?"

Thus ended the matter of the Yawa Eloem and those beasts which, in the great folly of his wisdom, he undertook to remold as fleshly servants in the image of himself. It is a sad and disheartening tale, and one I would not tell save that some critics have seen fit to cast aspersions upon the truly noble character of our exiled brother.

Thus ended, too—so far as our knowledge extends—the existence of the Yawa and his creations. As had been commanded, they were placed within my spacecraft, therein forever banished from fair Kios. Where, when and how their journey ended, or if ever, I know not. Perhaps they wander still, their craft a tiny mote in the vastness of all swaddling space. Perhaps somewhere they met cruel ending in the flaming heart of a star. Perhaps—and this I hope—they found somewhere a planet, and upon it made a new home.

However this may be, I cannot say. But this I know: those do great wrong who criticize the Yawa Eloem, naming him fiend and traitor. Never lived a nobler soul, nor one with greater ambition for the welfare of his own race. That he sinned is undeniable, but his sin was only that of tampering with forces too great for him. For as all know, there are limits beyond which one is forbidden to probe. And they who seek to know, with the gods, the secret of the creation of life are ever doomed to failure.

It was a wondrous dream the Yawa Eloem dreamed. But there was one thing he failed to take into consideration: the animal nature of those he tried to endow with

intelligence. Never, never—though they raised themselves from all fours to walk like beings—could they slough off those animal instincts. It was that which the Yawa could not foresee, and that which caused his downfall.

So . . . they are gone, the Yawa Eloem and they whom he created: the male to whom he gave the name Adam and the she who was called Eve. Yet mourn I my exiled brother, and ever is my soul sick within me when I think on that which overthrew him—

—On the cunning . . . the dreadful, dreadful cunning of the beasts . . .

*And tell of the signs you shall shortly see;  
Of the times that are now, and the times that shall be.*

Hogg—Kilkenny

## THE LAST OUTPOST

*"You must do one more tale," he said, and his words were a grim command. "You must do one more story of the days that are yet to be. You dare not refuse. For on its telling may depend the fate of all mankind. . . ."*

From my study window, with a frank and half-amused curiosity, I watched him coming down the street. He was such a worried looking little man and—unlike the usual run of magazine peddlers of which, to judge by the bulging briefcase under his arm, he was one—so obviously intent on finding one particular address.

The reason for my amusement was, of course, that in our neighborhood homes have no numbers. Our suburb barely clings to the fringes of the city; it is the rare block that boasts more than two or three dwellings. Thus our houses need no numbers, and we give them none.

Finally he glimpsed me standing at my study window, and started across my lawn. It was a hot day, and my work was not going well. Under such circumstances, a writer welcomes any interruption. I stepped forth to meet him.

Call it fate, if you will, or coincidence. Call it anything you wish to explain why I, of all persons, should have been the one who met the stranger. Whatever you

call it, it was the first of a series of surprises too intimate, too disturbingly accurate, to be wholly fortuitous.

For as we approached each other across the lawn, he smiled apologetically and—"Good afternoon," he said. "Could you tell me which of these houses is the home of Nelson Bond?"

"I'm Nelson Bond," I said, and his eyes lighted.

"You are? What luck! I wonder if we might—" He glanced meaningfully in the direction of my study. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you. A matter of greatest importance."

To you, I thought derisively. An encyclopedia. Or life insurance. Or maybe an investment trust of some sort. Though why in the world anyone should suspect a writer of having any money to invest . . .

But it was a dull day, and any excuse to escape the typewriter was a good one. I nodded and led the way indoors. As I cleared space for him on a lounge chair cluttered with a hodge-podge of reference books and old manuscript carbons, he watched me with bright, bird-like interest.

"You're a younger man than I thought," he said.

I kept a straight face, but chuckled inwardly. Then it is insurance, I thought; well, watch him take a powder when I toss my bombshell at him. In as casual a tone as I could manage I said, "Well, maybe I'd look even younger if I didn't have this damned ulcer."

That's the gambit which usually quick-freezes insurance men. One whisper of the magic word "ulcer" and they make for the nearest exit. But my visitor merely shook his head commiseratingly.

"You have one, too? Does it annoy you all the time, or only periodically? Mine seems to act up worst in April and October. They tell me—"

"Sit down," I said, a bit disgruntled. "I'd rather not talk about it, if it's all the same to you. Now—you had something to discuss with me?"



He sat—perched, rather—on the edge of his chair and gazed intently into my eyes.

“Yes, Mr. Bond, I have. But before I begin, let me introduce myself. My name is Westcott—Dr. Arthur Westcott. I am a medical doctor and a practising psychiatrist connected with—”

The institution he named is one of the South’s most famous clinics, specializing in mental ailments. I looked at him with some suspicion.

“Delighted to meet you, Dr. Westcott. But if you’re here to make a case history of me simply because my stories run for the most part to fantasy—”

He leaned forward earnestly.

“I have no intention of making you a case history,” he said. “But I *am* here because you are known as a writer of fantasies. Fantasies and science fiction.”

Perhaps I preened myself a trifle. His wasn’t much of a compliment, but any writer likes to hear he is “known”—if only for his *Pro Bono Publico* complaints in the Letters to the Editor section of his local newspaper.

I corrected him gently. “Fantasies only, Dr. Westcott. I don’t write science fiction any more.”

He stared at me in something remarkably like alarm.

“You don’t write science fiction?”

“Not for a number of years. Five or six, anyway.”

“But,” he protested, “you must! It’s the only way! That’s why I’m here. You’ve got to do it—or Grayson is mad, and the whole thing is a maniac’s wild dreaming. I can’t believe that’s true.”

It was my turn to stare at him in something considerably like alarm. I said carefully, “I’m afraid I don’t understand. Who is Grayson? And why on earth should I write a story for a field of fiction I deserted years ago?”

“On Earth!” laughed my guest—without mirth in his laughter. “On Earth, indeed. It is odd you should use those words.”

Then his face was suddenly grave, and his eyes were bleak with a vision I could not share.

"You must do one more tale," he said, and his words were a grim command. "You must do one more story of the days that are yet to be. You dare not refuse. For on its telling may depend the fate of all mankind. . . ."

It was a hot summer day. Everywhere the leaves stirred fretfully in the wake of a stifling breeze; in the skies above no wisp of cloud offered shield to the searing torrent of the sun. There was, then, no reason why it should seem to me that for an instant there touched my nape a breath of chilling wind, heavy and foreboding as the draft that precourses a squall.

No reason, again, why my query that ended the brief silence should have been voiced in something barely more than a whisper. But there was something about Dr. Westcott—his preternatural gravity, the taut conviction of his plea that was more than a demand—which compelled a like intensity.

"Tell me," I suggested.

He nodded and touched the briefcase beside him. "I will explain," he said in that curiously stilted, definition-conscious style so frequently found in educators. "I will explain. Only this can tell you."

It was a manuscript he drew from the briefcase. In the true meaning of the word a manuscript—a thick bundle of pages written by hand, not type. Westcott did not give it to me. I had time to notice only that the writing was sprawling and ill-formed; then my visitor laid the sheets down again.

"I have already told you who I am and what I do. I take it you are familiar with the nature of our clinic and my work?"

I nodded. "Mental rehabilitation. Emphasis on war victims. Shellshock, battle fatigue—that sort of thing."

"Quite correct," nodded Westcott. "And if I may say

so, we have had an unusual degree of success in our treatment of those unfortunates through the use of new and experimental therapies.

"Not the least of which," he continued in his stiff, pedantic style, "is a treatment of the psychotic trauma by hypnosis. You have undoubtedly read or heard something about this technique. Our efforts include conversational hypnosis, post-hypnotic suggestion, and automatic writing."

"You make the patient remember what happened to him," I said, "things so terrible that his psyche rejected them—and you effect a cure. That the principle?"

"That," nodded my visitor, "is the basic principle. But suppose—" Here he lifted to mine eyes that were frankly baffled—"Suppose a patient were to remember events which he could never possibly have witnessed? What then would your explanation be?"

I frowned. "The question is a contradiction in terms. No one can 'remember' things he hasn't known."

"Grayson can," said Dr. Westcott simply.

"Grayson?"

"One of my patients. An ex-pilot with the Army Air Corps. The man who wrote this."

He touched once more the manuscript lying face down between us. I stared at it, then at him, curiously.

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Doctor." I essayed the light touch. "Which of us is the fantasist? You or me?"

"I don't know," replied Westcott ruefully. "I honestly don't know. I wish to God I did. For if Frank Grayson is sane, then all our scientific knowledge is as a sapling in the vast forest of truths yet to be learned, and man's infant culture totters on the brink of a frightful catastrophe. And if Grayson is mad—then I, too, am mad. For, Lord help me—I believe him!

"Please let me finish," he went on hurriedly, "and listen with an open mind. I came two hundred miles

to see you because, whether you will it or not, you are a part of this strange, tangled skein. It may be that you won't believe what I have come to tell you. That doesn't matter. Whether you believe or not, there is a story you must write.

"Or, rather, there is a story you must publish. It is this story—" He touched the manuscript. "The tale written by Frank Grayson under automatic reflex, when he was hypnotized and had no knowledge of what his hand was doing."

"Just a minute!" I interrupted a bit angrily. "You want me to publish under my own name these dream-world ravings of a mental patient? What gives you the idea I'd do such—"

"Isaiah," said Westcott in strangely trancelike tones. "Isaiah, Samuel, and Jeremiah. The *na-bi-u* of Babylon, the oracles of Greece. Nostradamus, Joseph Smith—and Billy Mitchell. What is prophecy, and by what wild talent may some men glimpse a fragment of the future?"

"All those I have named, and countless others, were mocked by their fellow men for daring to foresay that which was to come. Yet in the ebbing of slow time their prescience was proven. And all too terribly may yet be proven true the prophecy of Frank Grayson.

"This manuscript was written by the hand of Grayson. But it was not his brain that dictated its words. Grayson is my patient; I know the way he thinks, the way he talks. These words are no more his than the hand in which these sentences are written is his handwriting. See here—"

He laid before me the final page of the manuscript. Beneath the concluding lines of that sprawling cacography was a final paragraph: "*I, Francis J. Grayson, hereby attest that the foregoing was written by me, under hypnosis, at the times hereafter noted—*"

The statement gave dates and hours. Both statement

and signature were penned in a neat, precise hand—the printed script favored by draftsmen and artists. The writing was in no respect like that of the preceding pages.

“Whether this be prophecy or prescience,” continued Westcott, “I do not know. By whatever means Grayson happened forward up the stream of time, the fact remains that McLeod’s story is vivid, forceful, and potentially of the greatest importance—”

“McLeod?” I interrupted. “Who is McLeod?”

“The man who really lived this adventure,” answered Westcott. “Kerry McLeod—soldier, pioneer, and colonist of Earth’s outpost on the planet Venus in the year Nineteen Eighty-five A.D.”

There are times when speech is impossible. This was such a time. I opened my mouth to say something, but no words came. I didn’t know what to say because I didn’t know my own reaction to this fantastically incredible situation.

If Westcott were a would-be writer trying to snare me into publishing under my name one of his fledgling tales, I had every justification for anger. Yet there was a disconcerting sincerity in the manner of my guest. His were not the eyes of a guileful man, nor was there any laughter in them.

What finally I should have said, I do not know. It was spared me the necessity of saying anything, for Westcott rose, placing before me the manuscript.

“I will go now,” he said, “and leave this with you. I ask only one thing: that even though you doubt, when you have finished reading it, you do that which the tale tells you you must do. No matter what you believe, dare not gamble on your judgment.

“The tale, you will find, begins and ends abruptly, as began and ended Grayson’s curious rapport with Kerry McLeod. It has several gaps, coincident with Grayson’s intervals of non-hypnotic consciousness. The text has



errors, both of grammar and fact. Some of these I have already corrected. Feel free to revise others as seems best to you. The degree of literary excellence is incidental. It is not important that Kerry McLeod lacks culture. It is of the utmost importance that he be given the message, the clue, he so direly needs."

He smiled briefly, tentatively.

"I hope," he said, "that when you have read, you will believe—as I do. And now, I wish you good day."

I watched him down the street and out of sight, the little stranger whose curious demand had roused in me emotions so troubled and confused. And then, of course, I read the manuscript.

—Which now, as I was bade, I offer you. It comes to you under my name in a book of stories, the rest of which are frankly and admittedly fantasies.

How, then, can I convince you that of the lot, this one alone is not wild imagining, but chill and sober truth? What protest will convince you that I am herein simply an instrument through which is brought to you the story of a man not yet born?

Only the by-line is mine. The story is the story of Kerry McLeod, colonist of an outpost distant by many millions of miles and many decades of time . . .

## II

. . . shoved me violently, and another snatched at my gun. I kicked at the one in front of me and he fell back, spitting curses and teeth. Then I whirled and grabbed the hand fumbling at my holster. It was a lean, strong, sinewy hand, but mine was toughened in the Bratislava campaign and on the steppes before Moscow. I twisted, and my attacker screamed as bones grated.

Even so they would have got to me in a few minutes,

for there must have been eight or ten of them surrounding me, held at bay only by the fear I might use my gun. The streets were deserted at this late hour, and lightless. There was no moon, and the fitful glare of that damned crimson ball crawling across the sky was worse than starlight or no light at all. It cast its red, unhealthy hue on all it touched, until even the shadows seemed dabbled with the color of blood, and they flickered and shifted like furtive, creeping things.

Footsteps shuffled nearer, and a taut voice called, "Don't be a fool, Corpsman! We don't want to hurt you unless you make us. We are your friends and the friends of all mankind. Throw down your blaster and join with us."

"And if I don't?" I asked.

"Then we'll take it anyway," came the answer, "but you won't live to join us."

"Your opinion," I said. "I've got a full cartridge that says otherwise. Come and get it, Sackies!"

I thought that would anger them, and it did. Other voices merged in a growl, and in the blood-tinted darkness you could feel them tensing for action. If there's anything in the world they can't stand, it's to be called Sackies. I slipped my blaster from its holster and thumbed back the safety catch. I wasn't as confident as I'd tried to sound, but of one thing I was certain: they would take from *me* no blast-gun to add to their steadily growing arsenal. My cartridge would go before I did.

"As you wish," snarled their spokesman. "They who refuse our friendship are our enemies. Brothers—*by the Sign!*"

I set myself as they came at me in a flood of clawing, fanatic humanity. Not yet did I hit the stud. Too well had been drilled into me the law of the Corps. *Fight solely to keep the peace, and then to disable, not kill.* With clubbed barrel I struck at them, spinning, whirling, fending them off, fighting to break out of their

tightening net. A cudgel glanced off my temple, raked my cheek and jaw, and suddenly I tasted the hot, salt flavor of blood. A weight hurled itself on my back, and the chill of an outlawed knife touched my arm as I stumbled to my knees.

Then came relief, as welcome as it was un hoped for. Twin beams of light swirled around the corner, with whiteness sponging out the sal low shadows, with blinding clarity fixing my attackers in midstride. The distinctive whistle of a patrol siren shrilled, brakes squealed, and a voice cried, "Hey, what's going on here? Break it up! Break it up!"

The weight lifted suddenly from my back, encircling arms no longer bound my knees, as the Diarist gang took to its heels. Where they disappeared to, heaven only knows. Like the rats they were, they scuttled into doorways, alleys, entrances that mysteriously opened to receive them, then as mysteriously closed. In a matter of seconds I was alone in the street with the two Corpsmen who hurried to me from the car.

I rose, dusting myself, and they gasped as they saw my uniform.

"A Corpsman!" exclaimed the patrol sergeant. Then, suspiciously, "But what outfit? You're not local."

"That's right," I nodded. "Lieutenant McLeod, Pan-American Sector." I didn't think it necessary to tell a pair of local watchdogs I was with Intelligence. "Thanks for the rescue job. Things looked bad."

"You look bad. That cut very deep?"

I had felt the steel, but had not realized until he brought it to my attention that the Diarist's blade had gashed my arm from wrist to elbow. It was an ugly slash, but neither painful nor serious. I wrapped a handkerchief about it.

"I don't think so. It will hold till I get a medic to look at it."

"Get him to look at that bump on your noggin, too,"

suggested the sergeant. "It looks like a second head."

"I could use another one—with more brains than the first. A midnight walk alone through this sector wasn't such a bright idea. The Sackies are nasty here, eh?"

"They're nasty everywhere," he grunted, "but Fedhed is infested with the meanest breed." He eyed me thoughtfully. "I suppose you know we'll have to take you to sector headquarters for a ref check, Lieutenant? You've got your creds?"

I patted my pocket. "All in order, Sergeant."

"You *look* right," he conceded, "but we can't afford to take chances any more. They've been picking up Corpsmen's uniforms lately, as well as arms and ammo. Last month a Fedhed guard turned out to be a Diarist in disguise. We have no idea what information he managed to smuggle out to his Sackcloth buddies before we nabbed him. We'll learn that the hard way, I suppose, a few months from now."

"You're right to play it safe," I told him. "And I want to meet the local authorities, anyway. Let's go."

We piled into the patrol car. The headlights bored a tunnel of safety before us as we sped across the avenues of once-populous New York to the massive buildings which are the World Federation Headquarters. Above us that damned, sanity-shaking demon watched our progress with a baleful, scarlet eye.

General Harkrader, commander of Fedhed, motioned me to a chair across the wide mahogany desk from his own. There were cigarettes in a box at my elbow and a decanter of Scotch in a cellaret beside me.

"Well, Lieutenant," he said, "now that your credentials have been checked and you're patched up, relax and take it easy for a few minutes." He grinned. "We gave you a fine welcome to Fedhed, didn't we?"

"My own fault, sir," I admitted. "I should have known better than to take a post-curfew stroll through Diarist districts. But where I come from, the Sackies are scattered and not at all dangerous."

Harkrader grunted his envy.

"Wish I could say the same! This area is a regular hotbed of them. Mass demonstrations, noonday worships, public exhibitions of resistance, passive and otherwise—everything you've ever heard of them doing anywhere else, and some you've never dreamed of in your worst nightmares. Where do you come from, anyway?"

"Pan-American," I told him. "St. Thomas."

His brows lifted.

"Oh? Intelligence?"

"That's right."

He selected a cigarette with slow care and lighted it. "Here on furlough?" he asked, not casually enough. "Or assignment?"

"Assignment," I said frankly. Then, as a swift apprehension swept his eyes, "But there's nothing for you to be concerned about, General. I'm not here to investigate Fedhed or your command, but to ask your help. We need information."

He seemed almost to expand with relief. It's funny how the rest of the Corps always jells with something akin to horror when you admit to being an I-man. It must trace back to the Loyalty Purges. But, Lord, those took place way back in '71 or '72, when I was a cadet on the Island.

"Anything I can do to help, Lieutenant—"

"Good. Here's the sixtifer. What do you know about a man named Douglas Frisbee?"

"Professor Frisbee?"

"He calls himself that," I said, "in spite of the edict against such titles."

"Of course," said Harkrader, flustered. "I mean, he



used to be a profess—a teacher at Columbia, here in New York, when that university was still in use as an institution of higher learning.”

“Distributing point,” I corrected mechanically, “of individualistic fallacies.”

“Quitel” agreed the Fedhed commander immediately. “I mean simply that—well, I’m thirty years your senior, Lieutenant, and we oldsters are inclined to be a bit lenient in our appraisal of the old ways and customs—”

“We were speaking of Frisbee,” I reminded him.

“Oh, yes—Frisbee. Nice old fellow. Shade on the dreamy side, but solid—confoundedly solid!—in his field. Which was—”

“Nuclear physics. We know that. What else?”

“Eh? Why—nothing else. You’re right, of course. Frisbee was a nuclear physicist. One of the pioneer students in that field. Studied with Bohr in the early part of the century, worked with the United States Government on the primitive A-bomb experiments of World War II.”

“With the U.S. Government? A highly nationalistic man, then?”

“No more than any man born before the Federation was formed,” denied Harkrader. “No more than I—and I was a voting adult in 1971, the year the Federation militia seized control of world government.”

“Assumed control,” I amended, “under mandate of the freemen. You use words rather carelessly, General, for the commander of so important a post.”

“Lieutenant,” he said curtly, “you forget the difference in our rank!”

“And you, General,” I answered quietly, “forget the difference in our branches of service. It is my job to learn the facts. If in attempting to do so I offend you, I am sorry. But your condonement of Frisbee implies sympathy with his ideology. If you, yourself, have nationalistic leanings—”

"Now, Lieutenant," interposed Harkrader hastily, "don't jump to conclusions. I use words poorly, perhaps, but I'm a good soldier. I've commanded this post for a long time without any complaints. I don't want to tangle with Intelligence at this late date. I'm not a separationist, and I'm not a crackpot, radical, or troublemaker of any kind. I'm just a middle-aged human who understands—as you Island-bred youngsters may never understand—how the older generation feels about this strange new world we live in.

"Now," he went on, "you were speaking about Douglas Frisbee. What else do you want to know about him?"

"To your knowledge," I asked, "is he connected with Diarist activities?"

Harkrader stared at me incredulously.

"Frisbee a Sackie? Damn it, man, the very thought is absurd! If you had ever met him—"

"It is my intention to do just that," I said. "For your sake—and for his—I hope our suspicions are baseless. But Frisbee's movements during the past year have been most mysterious. His rural retreat has been frequented by an odd, if not sinister, group of associates. An inventory of his purchases discloses the fact that a great and rather alarming amount of dangerous material has been accumulated at his workshop. There is even reason to believe that from somewhere he has obtained a small amount of radioactive ore, and that he is conducting research prohibited by law."

"Old Frisbee!" said Harkrader. "I simply can't believe it! Oh, I can understand his accumulating experimental material. That's in nature with his character. But Frisbee a Sackie? Preposterous! I'd as soon judge *you* a worshipper of the Sign. Or myself."

"Nevertheless," I told him, "I must meet Frisbee."

"And you shall. I'll arrange transportation to his place right away." He reached for the visiphone. "Would you rather go by groundcar or gyro?"

"Gyro," I said.

So it was arranged.

If Douglas Frisbee was engaged in any conspiratorial activity, he was clever enough to have concealed all evidence of it perfectly.

I had deliberately elected to travel by gyro to his Long Island dwelling in order that from the air I might get a bird's-eye view of the estate. I got it, and noticed nothing at all suspicious. Frisbee's place was the home of a typical moderately well-to-do gentleman farmer. It had the usual line of larches separating its small acreage from adjacent estates and shielding it from the highway, and the usual outlay of barns, siloes and storage bins, the usual patch of land under cultivation, the usual formal garden around an attractive home in the somewhat conservative Frank Lloyd Wright manner.

It had, in addition, a large and beautiful artificial lake, upon the shimmering surface of which bobbed a number of small sail- and rowboats. Between this and the house stretched a wide expanse of lawn. It was here we landed our gyro.

Someone—a boy in his teens, I thought at first—saw us and crossed the lawn to greet us as our fans idled. I discovered almost immediately, however, that the slim, youthful figure dressed in sport shirt and slacks had deceived me. Our visitor had bronze hair cut to shoulder-length and clubbed in the perennially popular page-boy style. The swing of her walk—the smooth grace of an arm lifted in welcome—the glimpse of golden shadow where the curve of linen collar met the rise of warm young flesh—was pleasing evidence that the newcomer was very much a woman.

My pilot whistled appreciatively as she approached.

"Oh, brother!" he chuckled. "For once in my life they handed me a good assignment. It that's what

little girl Sackies look like, the Corps just lost itself a man!"

"That will do, Corporal," I said. I spoke a trifle more sternly than was necessary, I'm afraid, but for some reason or other his attitude annoyed and repelled me. He was a city-bred man, of course, and I should have let that be his apology. On the Island we see few women. Toward the sex, therefore, I have a feeling of curiously mingled respect and uneasiness. "Let me remind you that treason, even though spoken in jest, is still treason."

"Yes, sir," he said. "I'm sorry, sir."

Then the girl was beside us, watching us climb from the gyro.

"Hello!" she called. "You got here early. Dad was not expecting you till—" She stopped in mid-sentence as she saw our uniforms. "Why, you're Corpsmen!"

I saluted. "Yes, miss. Lieutenant McLeod, at your service. Corporal Babacz. This is the home of Dr. Frisbee?"

A look of guarded wariness clouded her gold-flecked eyes, and her smile of pleased expectancy had faded.

"Yes, Lieutenant. I am Dana Frisbee. Was my father expecting you?"

"No. But I'd like to see him. Is he at home?"

"He's—on the grounds somewhere. If you gentlemen will make yourselves comfortable on the porch, I'll find him. Have you had lunch?"

"Yes, thanks. Before we left Fedhed."

"Fedhed! Then this is an official visit?"

I said quietly, "If I could see your father, miss?"

"Yes. Oh, yes—of course. I won't be long."

She turned and left us, disappearing in the general direction of the outbuildings we had seen from top-side. That she was apprehensive was obvious; that there was some secretive sense of guilt underlying her anxiety was quite possible. I stared after her, frowning.

"It would be a shame," I mused, "for such a girl to be involved in illegal activities."

Corporal Babacz stared at me in slackjawed astonishment. "Beg pardon, sir? What did you say?"

I felt myself flush. It was true I had spoken with incautious impulse. A Corpsman should never permit himself to be swayed by personal considerations. But Babacz didn't have to be so damned obvious in his amazement. I am a human. I have a normal man's emotions and sympathies.

"Never mind," I said. "Let's go to the porch."

### III

"Diarist activities, Lieutenant?" said Dr. Frisbee. "Diarist activities? You're joking. You can't mean the Federaton is serious in its suspicion that I am implicated in the Diarist movement?"

"The authorities never joke, sir," I said severely. "I was sent here by Intelligence—"

"The title," said the ex-professor, "is a misnomer. Intelligence is not intelligent if it conceives for one instant that I would ally myself with the forces of superstition, ignorance and terror. Do you know, Lieutenant, just what the Diarist movement is?"

"Of course. An organized attempt on the part of an exhibitionist cult to overthrow the World Federation."

Frisbee shook his head, and sighed.

"You have been well versed in the semantics of your profession, Lieutenant. Your definition is letter-perfect—but it describes the goal of the Diarists, not the reason for the cult's existence. Do you know why they call themselves Diarists? Why they debase themselves in smocks of sackcloth? Why they hold public prayer sessions? Why their most solemn oath is 'by the Sign'?"

I said, "It has something to do with the comet."



"Something! It has everything to do with the comet! McLeod—are you an educated man?"

I told him proudly, "I was schooled on the Island, and graduated *cum laude* from the Federation Military Academy."

"I see. Then you are not educated—"

"My dear sir!"

"You are not educated," repeated Frisbee imperturbably, "in subjects of real and lasting importance to mankind. You have been well schooled in the so-called science of military tactics and maneuver, you have learned political dogma, and absorbed a certain amount of more or less distorted history—"

There was a sound suspiciously like a snicker at my elbow, but when I turned to look sharply at Babacz, he met my gaze with straight-lipped gravity. Dana Frisbee, on the other hand, was openly amused. Her lips curved in a smile that was more than polite friendliness, and in her tawny eyes the gold flecks danced and sparkled.

It was not a warm day, but I felt the sting of perspiration on my throat and brow.

I said carefully, "Dr. Frisbee, I think it is only fair to warn you that you are already under investigation for suspected disloyalty to the Federation. I shall have to make an official report on this interview. If you persist in your treasonable attacks on the government—"

"Treasonable, fiddlesticks!" exploded the scholar. "Since when has it become treason for a man to speak his mind on a subject of his own choosing? The trouble with you, young man—" Here he bent forward and shook his finger in my face as if he were a teacher admonishing some recalcitrant student— "The trouble with you is that you know nothing of life—nothing, sir!—except the pitiful potage of propaganda they've shoveled down your gullible young throat at that monstrous academy!"

"No—sit down!" he thundered as I started to rise.

"I'm not through yet. You came here to interview me, get my views on certain subjects. Well, you shall have them. If you want to arrest me when I'm finished, so be it. But at least I shall have the satisfaction of getting off my chest a lot of words that have needed airing for a long time."

"Dad—" ventured Dana Frisbee.

"Later, my dear. Right now I'm going to give these two young dupes of a corrupt and tyrannous autocracy a little history lesson. You, sir—" he glowered at Babacz from beneath shaggy white brows—"when was the Federation formed?"

Babacz was wholly under the old pedant's spell. He parroted reply as if reciting in a grade-school classroom.

"The World Federation of Sovereign Nations was conjoined in 1961 and ratified by a majority of member states in the same year."

"Correct!" snapped Frisbee. "Note that the Charter designated those member states as *sovereign* nations. And now you, sir. For what purpose was created the military force of which you are an officer?"

"The World Federation Police Corps," I replied, "is composed of selected youth of all member states, in ratio to the population of those states. It serves to preserve international harmony—"

"Hal" interjected Frisbee savagely.

"—protect individual liberties—"

"Hal"

"—and prevent the encroachment of force or ideals by any group upon any other portion of the world populace—"

"Enough!" said Frisbee. "Those were the principles on which our predecessors, twenty-odd years ago, agreed to surrender their ancient heritage of sovereign rights, in order to create what they hoped might be a finer union of all mankind. But was this dream accomplished? No—because the very tool with which the Federation

hoped to implement a high ideal turned out to be the weapon of destruction.

"The Corps! It was the Corps itself that ten years after ratification of the Federation Charter, in Nineteen seventy-one, ruthlessly took advantage of the fact that it was the only armed body in existence, and in a series of lightning moves overthrew the government and set up its own military oligarchy.

"It was the Corps which put into effect the drastic and oppressive code under which we now—"

At this point regrettably occurs one of those interruptions in the narrative of which I was forewarned by Dr. Westcott. This is doubly unfortunate: first, because of vast interest should be Douglas Frisbee's *post facto* commentary on that fragment of "history" which is still to us the unguessed future; second, because the manuscript resumes confusingly at a later time, and in other surroundings.

Anticipating the reader's natural curiosity, let me point out that the tale appears to resume about a day later, and that without making an arrest, Lieutenant McLeod has returned to Federation Headquarters, or, as in the easy vernacular of that era he calls it Fedhed. . . .

"—six riot calls since sunrise," he growled, "and more yet to come, or I miss my guess. I've called Boston and Philadelphia for reinforcements. They both turned me down on the same grounds: no can do. The Sackies have opened up with mass demonstrations in *their* cities, too. And judging by the tele reports—" he gestured hopelessly at the papers strewn on his desk—"it's the same story everywhere."

I asked, "What's behind it, General? Is this one of their holy days, or something?"

"Every day is a holy day to them, damn their hides!

And will continue to be as long as that burning devil rides the heavens!"

He turned to shake an angry fist at the comet which, spiraling high in the western sky, merged its crimson with the sun's summer gold to flood the room with a weird, orange hue. It was that shade of orange found in fog lamps, or on bridges, and in spots where night mists gather. By its reflection living flesh looks dead and corpse-like, lips seem swollen to a purpish pulp, and eyes gleam feverishly from heavy-circled sockets. Harkrader shook his fist in futile and impotent rage.

"It's a thing of evil. Its red magic is a spell on the minds of men."

"It's only a comet," I said; "a comet known to man for centuries. Halley's Comet. Our fathers saw it last time it approached the earth in nineteen ten; their grandfathers saw it in eighteen thirty-five. It's nothing to fear. It's a perfectly natural phenomenon, accurately predicted by astronomers and making its appearance on schedule."

"You know that," grunted the Fedhead commander, "and I know it. But the Diarists don't know it. Ignorant, superstitious scum that they are, they've made it their god, named it a sacred Sign to justify their rebellion."

I said, "Well, it's annoying, but I don't think it's anything to get disturbed over. This isn't the first time we've seen Diarist demonstrations."

"No? Speak for yourself, Lieutenant. Never in all my years have I seen an uprising to equal this one. This is serious! Spontaneous outbreaks in every major city of the world. Deliberate and concerted efforts to disrupt our lines of communication. Demonstrations of violence against any man wearing the uniform of the Corps. Attempts to break into our arsenals and arm their sackcloth rabble— Yes?"

This last was over his shoulder as an adjutant came

hurriedly into the room, too excited to observe the formality of knocking.

"The Sackies, sir. The mob surrounding the Central Park Arsenal—"

"Yes? I gave orders they were to be dispersed. It wasn't necessary to fire on them?"

"It was, sir. We did. But—"

"Too bad. I had hoped to avoid bloodshed. Issue a proclamation informing the public that the Corps sincerely regrets the incident and hopes it may not find it necessary to repeat such stringent measures."

"But that's not it, sir!" cried the adjutant, his voice cracking. "We fired on them, but they didn't run. Instead, they attacked in force. There were hundreds . . . thousands . . . of them. Many were killed, but the rest came on and on—"

"Speak up, man!" shouted the General. "What is it? What are you trying to tell me?"

"This, sir. That the garrison was wiped out to the last man. The Sackies have taken our main stronghold in New York sector!"

In the silence that followed the messenger's words, General Harkrader turned and stared down into the streets below. When he turned again to face us he had become subtly an older man.

"You see, McLeod?" he said.

I saw. In Central Park Arsenal had been stored material sufficient to arm and maintain for an indefinite siege every able-bodied man in the New York area. With the winning of these weapons the Sackies ceased to be a rabble, became an army equalling the Corps in equipment, outnumbering us perhaps twenty to one.

I said, "You were right, sir. But it's too late to cry over spilt milk. What are we going to do now?"

As if seeking answer himself, he turned and snapped



on the video. After a few seconds the screen cleared to show the familiar newsroom of the FBC's television studio. It was a scene of unreserved chaos and confusion. Forgotten was the traditional smoothness and urbanity of visual newscasting as a swarm of harassed reporters and analysts jockeyed for space in the equipment-cluttered studio, elbowing each other, sometimes bumping the cameras and making the image shake as their own sense of assurance must be shaking at this tense hour.

Before our eyes a reporter tore from one teletype a late report, rushed it to the camera and read it to us:

*"Bulletin: Washington. Panic seized the erstwhile capital city of the United States today as Diarists rose in overwhelming numbers to occupy all points of military importance in this strategic sector.*

*"Bulletin: London. A pitched battle rages in the ancient City of London today as hordes of Diarists pit their numerical superiority against the armaments and tactics of a beleaguered handful of Corpsmen. The Diarists now claim control of all terrain north of the Thames, and are advancing in force on the well fortified Southwark district.*

*"Bulletin: Rome. Sons of the Sign, arise! As we have done here, so can you do. Be forthright and brave. The Day has dawned—"*

The newscaster paled, stopped reading, hastily cast aside the Rome dispatch which provided self-evident proof that the Sackies held control of at least the Rome centers of news dissemination. He resumed:

*"Bulletin: Ottawa. The Governor-General of the Dominion has asked the local Diarist leader, Brother John Carstairs, for a truce. This request followed seizure by the cultists of every important warehouse and fortress in the sector.*

*"Bulletin: Moscow. Amid scenes reminiscent of the days of Soviet control, Corpsmen and Diarists today*

*locked in a grim battle for control of this city's vital Krem—"*

The screen shook suddenly, and the image fogged. A voice, cool and confident, overrode that of the newscaster.

"Here's the *latest* report, Brother. Let me give it to the public."

The image cleared. Fronting the camera stood a man clad in the loose sackcloth smock of the Diarist brotherhood. About the newsroom his armed followers rounded up the members of the video staff. The Sackie leader smiled, spoke squarely into the camera's eye.

*"Bulletin: World Federation Headquarters, New York. The Day has dawned. Brothers of the Sign, under the inspiration of their sacred symbol, now control the major portion of this city, seat of the corrupt World Federation government.*

*"We call upon all oppressed citizens to join us and celebrate the long-awaited Day. To Corpsmen and hirelings of the deposed government who will renounce their former allegiance, we offer full amnesty and Brotherhood in the Sign.*

*"Further resistance is useless. We are prepared to subdue without mercy any who—"*

Harkrader snapped off the video.

"Well," he said heavily, "that's it. A lifetime of building and planning overthrown in a single day. It seems we made a mistake, gentlemen. The always fatal error of underestimating our opponents."

The adjutant cried, "But there must be *something* we can do, General! They can't have won so final a victory. Not in so few hours!"

"Wrong again," sighed Harkrader. "Our strength was never in numbers. It lay in the fact that only we had weapons. Once they took the Arsenals—Simpson?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Gather the men of Fedhed. I want to talk to them. At once, please."

"Very good, sir."

The adjutant saluted and left. Harkrader stared at me sombrely.

"I'm going to turn them loose, McLeod. There's no use in their being slaughtered in a hopeless cause. The best we could hope for would be a delaying action—then heaven knows what retribution for our stubbornness."

"And you, sir?" I asked.

"I don't know. What does it matter? My life work, my career, ended today. They will execute me, I suppose. I cannot say I care. I am an old man. Within my lifetime I have seen strong sovereign nations fight innumerable bloody wars—to no conclusion. I have seen men devise a plan for peaceful living, and I have watched that plan go awry. Now this. What will come of it, I do not know. I do not greatly care.

"But you are young. What will *you* do?"

"I am a Corpsman," I said.

"You *were* a Corpsman. The Corps is dead."

"I am a Corpsman," I repeated, "bred and trained on the Island. I will carry on."

"Not from here, McLeod. I am surrendering Fedhed."

"There are other places. Secret places. Forts the Sackies never dreamed of."

He shrugged. "As you wish. Order what you need in the way of supplies or transportation facilities. That much I can give you."

"But first," I said. "I must return to Long Island. Frisbee warned me this was coming. He is not with us, but he is not with them, either. And he knows something—something great and important that he would not tell me. It is my duty to go back and learn his secret."

"Frisbee!" said Harkrader. "By Jove, yes! Frisbee. You've got something there, McLeod. He may be our

last hope. Lieutenant—give me fifteen minutes, and then I'll go with you."

"It would be an honor, sir," I told him.

Thus it was that a quarter-hour later Harkrader and I, in a gyro with Corporal Babacz again at the controls, took off from the roof of the Federation Headquarters on the first leg of a journey which was to carry us farther than our minds in their wildest imaginings could ever have conceived.

#### IV

Our landing at Frisbee's refuge was in strange contrast to our first visit there. Then the only one to meet us had been Dana. This time the poising of our gyro for vertical descent brought running to the field so startling a number of people that I could hardly believe my eyes.

It was a motley group. The only thing its members, of whom there were at least fifty, appeared to have in common was youth. All, with the exception of the scientist himself, were of my own generation.

There similarity ended, diversity began. About half were young women or girls. A part of these were dressed in normal street clothes, others wore laboratory smocks, still others were clad—like the majority of men—in grease-stained jumpers. Those men who were not in work clothes were garbed variously in executives' day-briefs, technicians' pileproofs, or similarly designed garments for special jobs. I noted two or three wearing portions of the distinctive rubberized suits used by divers for work in shallow submarine depths.

Harkrader glanced at me in frowning bewilderment.

"You didn't mention anything like this, McLeod."

"I didn't *see* anything like this yesterday."

"Maybe," suggested Babacz, "the old man *is* mixed up with the Sackies, after all?"

"I don't believe so. I have no idea where these people came from. But you'll notice they don't wear the smocks of the Brotherhood."

Our tricycle gear touched ground; Babacz halted the fans as the gyro bounced and settled. Instantly a solid wall of determined young bodies hemmed us in. A voice asked, "Who are you, and what do you want?"

There was a movement through the crowd, and Frisbee appeared.

"It's all right, Warren," he said quietly. "I know these men. They are not our enemies."

"They're Corpsmen, Professor," called one angrily. "All Corpsmen are our enemies."

"Man's greatest enemy," replied Frisbee in his calm, classroom manner, "is his animal instinct toward herd action. I will take care of this. The rest of you will please return to your tasks. And hurry! Remember that every minute, every second, is precious now."

Reluctantly, not without some grumbling and ominous backward looks, the group split and sifted away, leaving only Frisbee and his daughter. Dana wore stained denim overalls, and her bronze hair was caught in a faded kerchief. But she was beautiful. Her hands were oil-stained, and there was a smudge of carbon black on her nose, but I found her breath-taking in her loveliness. She smiled at me, and I could tell that she, too, was remembering that moment in the garden.

Frisbee said, "You are Harkrader. It's been a long time since we met, John."

"Thirty years, Professor," said Harkrader. "I graduated with the class of fifty-seven."

He used the old term quite instinctively and without seeming to know he had done so. Frisbee had that curious effect on the people. He retained an aura of the old days.

"Yes. That was a good class. One of the last *free* classes. In it were men of bright promise. Yourself . . .



Harry Sanders . . . Lou Chauvenet . . . Aaron Jablonski . . .

I listened, appalled and yet in awe. If these had been Harkrader's classmates, it had indeed been a year of great, if oddly various, men. All the names were famous—or infamous. Harold Sanders was permanent Chairman of the World Health Commission. Louis Chauvenet, renowned for his astrogational research, had for a decade blazed new trails toward spaceflight, and with the disappearance of his ill-fated Luna expedition in 1978, had become a legend. Aaron Jablonski had died with his stubborn little army of Loyalists at Cincinnati in the Nationalist Rebellion of 1973-4.

"Men of bright promise," repeated Frisbee. "I fear we shall not soon again see classes like that." He shook his head sadly. "This is an evil day, John. The long twilight has ended, and darkness falls."

"You've heard the news, then?"

"Yes."

"We heard nothing while flying here," I interposed. "Are the Diarists successful everywhere?"

"Almost everywhere. A few cities, some of the more remote garrisons, hold out. But the movement snowballs as the Brothers gain arms and converts. They hold airports now, and are flying reinforcements and supplies to stubborn sectors."

"Paris has fallen," said Dana, "and Berlin, and Fort Wainwright in the Philippines. The Diarists control all South America from Tierra del Fuego to the Gulf, excepting only the supply depot in the Matto Grosso. Asia is—"

"The Island?" I demanded. "They have not yet taken the Island?"

"Which island?"

Frisbee smiled at his daughter.

"To an I-man, my dear, there is only one Island."

"St. Thomas," I elucidated. "Intelligence G.H.Q."

"Oh—in the Virgins? No. We heard no report from there."

I smiled grimly. "You won't. The Sackies planned well but futilely. We still have a few aces up our sleeves."

Frisbee glanced shrewdly at me from beneath silvered brows. "Such as—"

"Well manned garrisons," I told him proudly, "in places the world doesn't even suspect. Antarctica, Van Diemen's Land—no need to name them. But I think the Sackies will start chanting a different hymn when the plutes begin to fall."

"Plutes!" cried Frisbee. "Plutonium bombs? But you can't do that! Atomic warfare was outlawed more than twenty years ago!"

"In warfare between powers. But this is different. This is world revolt against a recognized authority. The end justifies the means."

"You fools!" roared the physicist. "You stupid and arrogant damned fools! Don't you realize the authority of your government has been challenged because it is dictatorial and venal? Because men would rather die than live under such restrictions as you have placed on them?"

"Would you rather see a world governed by religious fanatics? Madmen in sackcloth who worship a comet?"

"I'd rather see *such* a world than no world at all!" Frisbee ran shaking fingers through his hair. "I dislike the Diarist rebellion and its precepts, but I was prepared to accept it for a time as the lesser of evils. Now the choice is out of my hands. Out of the hands of all men."

"You're getting excited over nothing," I said. "In a few days the revolt will be brought under control—"

"In a few days," cried the scientist, "the earth on which we live may no longer exist! McLeod—did it never occur to your precious Intelligence that the conspirators, too, may have atomic weapons?"

I stared at him, dry-lipped. The thought had never

occurred to me, I freely acknowledged—not until that moment. Now suddenly I realized what could happen if by any chance he were right. In my second year of training as a cadet we were taken to the Safety Zone around what used to be the Oak Ridge experimental station, and were shown the results of the catastrophe there. That pile had exploded some nine years before, but the terrain for a thirty mile diameter about the gigantic crater was still violently radioactive.

I answered, "But—but they can't. Atomic materiel is on the proscribed list. Only the Federation—"

"Nonsensel" rapped Frisbee. "Uranium and plutonium are hard, perhaps impossible, to get, it's true. But those are not the only radioactive miners, McLeod. Thorium . . . actinium . . . Phoebeium\* . . . all these are equally as potent a source of atomic energy as the commonly used elements. With what do you think I have conducted my experiments, built my—"

He stopped abruptly as Dana cried, "Dad!" But what had been said was beyond recall. I picked him up swiftly.

"Yes—your experiments. What *have* you built?"

Dana said, "Kerry, let's go up to the house? I'm a little tired, and it's so hot here in the sun—"

"What, Doctor?"

"Why do you want to know?" flared Dana. "So you can report it to your cold-blooded superiors on the Island? Well, we'll not tell you. It's our secret, and—"

"Dana, my dear," interposed Frisbee. "If you don't mind? Thank you. McLeod, it had not been my intention to let you in on our secret. But my careless tongue has already betrayed me, and perhaps it does no harm.

\* This word is here faithfully reproduced from Kerry McLeod's manuscript, though the meaning is not clear. Present-day chemistry recognizes no element known as phoebeium, but we do not know whether the word is a later era term for a mineral now known to us by another name, or whether phoebeium is an element now "missing" from our periodic tables, thus yet to be discovered by science.

Tell me—had you not guessed, in a wide sense, what we are doing here?”

“Frankly, sir, no. My information was that you had gathered a considerable amount of construction material and a certain amount—we do not know how much—of active ores. I satisfied myself yesterday that you were not a Diarist. So I assume you have been conducting some private experiments with atomic force. Further than that—”

“Why make you waste time and words?” asked Frisbee. “The answer is quite simple. We have utilized atomic energy, McLeod. But not as a means for destruction. We are using the power of the atom as a drive.”

“Drive?”

“Yes. That which my followers have built here, the creation with which we had planned to escape this earth and a despotic rulership, is—a spaceship!”

“Spaceship!” I cried. And I looked at Hark—

Here again it is necessary to apologize for a break in the continuity of Kerry McLeod’s narrative, as relayed via the hand of Frank Grayson.

There seems to be no day-to-day correlation between these two men’s lives. According to the attested record, only four days elapsed between the conclusion of this segment and Frank Grayson’s next period of hypnosis. But there appears to be an interval of almost two weeks in the world of Kerry McLeod.

Obviously, I cannot explain the conversion of the three Corpsmen to Frisbee’s cause. Events of which there exist no record must have had much to do with such a change. However, the text provides ample evidence that a growing personal interest in Dana Frisbee may have influenced McLeod.

As usual, the narrative resumes abruptly. The scene of the following portion is the interior of Frisbee’s covertly constructed spacecraft:

—assorted instruments, the usage of which I could only surmise. The massive control panel, with its banks of keys and levers, made that of the most complex jet-plane look simple as a child's toy. A bucket-shaped pressure seat was centrally mounted before the controls. Just above this pilot seat were six vision plates, each about two feet square. They formed a cross shape, with four squares in a vertical line and the other two as wings jutting from the second panel.

"For universal vision," explained Dr. Frisbee. "We cannot get by with mere peripheral vision, as can aviators of earthbound machines. In space we must be able to spot danger coming at us from any direction."

"How do they read?" I asked.

"The vertical plates reflect the images of topside, fore, below, and aft. The wings mirror starboard and port. I fear there isn't much to see just now—"

He smiled whimsically. The crossbar showed only the dull gray of lapping lake waters, as did the pane at the bottom. The topmost plate shone yellow-green as the sunlight filtered through the waters above us, and schools of darting minnows passed briefly before our vision and vanished. It was a striking reminder of where we were. Harkrader voiced a query for the three of us.

"But why did you build it under water, Professor?"

"Can you think of a safer place?" demanded Frisbee. "Concealed as the *Phoenix* was, Intelligence got suspicious of me and sent Kerry here to investigate. If it had been out in the open—" He shrugged.

"A safer place, he says!" grunted Babacz. "Suppose it had sprung a leak?"

"Teofil, Teofil!" clucked our host. "A vessel that lets water in would also let air out. And that is one fault, above all others, we must not allow. Indeed, one of the main reasons for finishing the *Phoenix* under water was so we might adequately test its spaceworthiness.

"You understand, of course," he continued, "that we



built the frame in the open. Then we sunk the shell and went on with our work."

I asked, "Why is it you're showing us all this now, doctor? Why didn't you let us into this section the time you first told us about the spaceship, and took us through it?"

"A fair question, Kerry, simply answered. I wasn't completely sure all or any of you could be trusted—then. Now I am satisfied you are with us."

"The way things are going, we'd be idiots not to be with you."

"This is the heart of the *Phoenix*, the nerve-center from which originate its most vital impulses. Until you were solidly allied with us, I dared not risk letting you see this chamber."

"We have said we are with you," said John Harkrader quietly. "The word of a Corpsman—even of an ex-Corpsman—can be depended upon."

"I know that. That's why you are here today. That is why I am going to teach you things about the *Phoenix* that even the earliest of my young followers do not know."

"You three men," continued Frisbee, "are our latest recruits, but in many ways you are our most valuable. Technicians, all of you, skilled professionals in your fields, you must be my aides and co-pilots in handling the *Phoenix*."

He glanced at us in turn.

"Well, gentlemen? World events plunge to disaster. There is little time left to us. What do you say?"

Babacz gave the simplest and most convincing reply, touching a red-handled lever on the control panel: "This here gadget, Professor," he asked. "What is it for? And how does it work?"

It was good for our sanity that in the ensuing days we had study with which to divert our minds from what went on in the world outside our little refuge.

As Frisbee had grimly foretold, neither the Sackies nor the Corps could be called winners in the atomic battles raging throughout the world. If the destruction of a stronghold, the ravaging of an entire city, could be called a victory, there were victories for each side. But they are hollow triumphs wherein a salient is not taken but blasted out of existence, where the bomb dropped by a robot plane brings agonizing death to a civilian population ranging into the hundreds of thousands.

I will confess that my own emotions were confused. I believed in Frisbee and trusted him. Yet I was trained on the Island, and in those earliest days my hope was that the Corps would put down the rebellion, restoring peace and order to a world gone mad.

I will contend, too, that the Corps adhered to its principles. It did not—as did the Diarists—strike without warning. From its remote headquarters on the Byrd Peninsula it issued an ultimatum that key cities were to be bombed unless returned to Federation control within a specified time. These cities were fairly named, and the citizens were warned of the consequences of refusal. But they rejected the order scornfully. And at the expiration of the time limit, the bombs fell. Chicago died in a day, victim of a disaster even more terrible than that which had razed part of it a century before. Dublin and its half-million inhabitants disappeared in a red fungus. So, too, passed other admonished and defiant cities.

Then came retaliation, swift and terrible. On the Island fell the bombs of the Sackies, on cities still held by Federation forces fell others. Civilization staggered as two blind and brutal giants trampled back and forth over the face of the globe, exchanging blows in a battle of mutual destruction.

We saw New Orleans fall. The Sackies, triumphantly in possession of what had been Fedhed's master station, telecast a remote of the bombing of the Gulf city. Through electronic eyes set in the robot bombers we

watched the city rise from the morning mists, saw the bomb find its target, watched the stalk of lurid smoke burgeon with its flower of flame and death.

Then, even as the news commentator boasted, "*So falls another Federation fortress that defies the Brotherhood—*" a tremor shook the screen. The vision plate burned with an eye-piercing color more dazzling than white, and the image ended. Two hours later we learned that the first of four A-bombs landing on Manhattan had scored a direct hit on the TV tower. The old landmark of Radio City was now a tangled mass of steel struts and powdered masonry.

My heart was with the Corps when the bombing began. It was sick for all mankind after a few days. And it was well, as I have said, that we had study with which to divert our minds from what went on in the world outside. Study and work. For there remained to us little time, thought Dr. Frisbee.

"We have been lucky so far," he claimed. "It would be foolish to expect our good luck to last forever. We are living now on borrowed time. A guerrilla battle in this sector . . . chance discovery by a band of pillaging Diarists . . . miscalculation of a ballistics engineer thousands of miles away . . . any of these could lead to our instant destruction. Our only hope for survival is flight. As soon as possible."

"How soon can that be, Professor?" asked Harkrader.

"Possibly tomorrow. Surely no later than the day after that. We are laying in stores and supplies now as fast as we can. The fuel bins are filled, the motor is primed and ready. There remains but to finish loading, and to transfer my library from the house to the *Phoenix—*"

"Books, too? I thought you were trying to conserve cargo space as much as possible, Professor?"

Frisbee smiled thinly.

"On nonessentials only, Kerry. A reference library may prove our saving weapon in the strange world to which

we are going. Yes, I am taking the books. Not only those on technical subjects, but fiction, as well. Novels . . . poetry . . . plays . . . a sampling of man's efforts in the world of dreaming. Had men read more and striven less for personal gain, what we seek now to escape might never have come upon us."

I shrugged and said nothing. He was entitled to his opinion, of course. But for my part I found no need of such soporifics. Novels and plays, silly rhymes by long-haired bards of bygone days—these had no place in my life. I was bred a Corpsman. We honor facts, not fancies.

Babacz looked interested. But, then, Babacz is not a cultured man, an Academy graduate like myself.

"Say, Professor, I'd like to get a crack at some of those books. How about letting me see that they're transferred safely?"

"A good idea, Teofil."

"All right. I'll get at it right away."

Babacz left. We heard him outside calling together some of the crew members to help him. He got along well with those others, did Babacz. Better, I must admit frankly, than did Harkrader and I. It was not that they were not fine youngsters. It was just that—oh, I can't explain it, exactly. But we were—or had been—Corpsmen. And Frisbee's recruits were one and all from the masses.

Still, they were needed. Frisbee had made that clear.

"No, they are not the best educated of Earth's present-day children," he admitted candidly one night, "but they are the soundest. They are neither wards of the Federation, schooled only in the science of military politics, nor are they products of the inept public schooling system that today teaches nothing but blind acquiescence to authority.

"These youths and maidens are my own students, hand picked and trained by myself. On them depends

the success of our venture, not only in their generation but in the years to come.

"The *Phoenix*," he said gravely, "is the new Ark of mankind, built to escape the deluge of terror. From the loins of these sound children must spring a new race of freemen, bringing the best of Earth's heritage to our far outpost on Venus—"

That was when first I learned our destination.

That night I walked again with Dana in the gardens. It was a night of no moon, but none was needed. The light of the comet was like the crimson of an August dawn, except that where the rising sun of summer is clean and fresh and promising, the comet's lurid glare was sickly and foreboding. It was not hard to understand the superstitious dread of those who humbled themselves in sackcloth to its worship. Its awful presence, to an unlearned mob, could easily seem herald of the grim Day of Judgment, for the advent of which the Diarists had named their cult.

Still, when we walked in the garden together it was possible to forget for a while the evil which had madened the minds of men. The breezes of night were gentle and cool, and the accents of evening were sweet. By the hedge where first we had learned we were fated to be more than warring strangers, Dana paused.

"It was here, Kerry. Funny, isn't it? I hated you then—or thought I did. You were our enemy; you had come to spy on us. My only thought was to keep you here as long as I could, delay your report to your superiors. When you told me you must go, I could have killed you. But I had no weapon."

"You had a weapon," I told her. "Your hatred was a weapon, and your scorn. Your hair and your eyes in the moonlight. When you struck me, and I took you in my arms—"

"Must I make you defend yourself again?" she whis-



pered. She raised her lips to mine, and there was no defense. There was only herself and myself, a oneness with the silence of the night. . . .

Later, we lay and looked up at the stars. Even the comet's baleful glow could not occult the whole star-spangled bowl which is the sky. Dana drowsily recited the strange and magic names of the ageless constellations burning above us.

"Scorpio, Sagittarius and Capricorn," she murmured. "Hercules, and Cygnus the Swan. They're lovely, aren't they, Kerry?"

*She was lovely.*

"Antares, the foe of Mars—" She pointed to a red star low on the southern horizon. "And that blue one is Vega, base of the gods' own lyre. And, see? The brightest of them all, Kerry. Thel!"

She turned my head, and I searched for an echo of the starlight mirrored in the copper of her hair.

"Do you know what that one is, Kerry? The one that shines like a jewel? That's Venus, my darling. Venus, who was the goddess of love. Could there be a better omen? We shall found our new empire on love."

I kissed her. There was much to be said for the education of Frisbee's school, I was learning. Useless knowledge, perhaps, some of it. But rich and warm and filling.

"And those other stars?" I teased her. "Don't they have names? Or do they move so fast they can't be named?"

"Others? Move so fast? But the stars move slowly, Kerry. You can't see them move. Only shooting stars, meteors—"

Her eyes followed the direction of my gaze. Then a gasp broke from her lips, and she leaped to her feet, tugging at my hand.

"Kerry! Those aren't stars! Those are jet-flames—rocket planes headed this way. Hurry!"

We started toward the house. But we were not alone

in spotting the flight. The guard posted by Frisbee had seen it, too. Even as we stumbled awkwardly over green lawns made fallow by the blood-red rays of the comet, the silence keened with the moan of our warning siren.

We had almost reached the porch when the first bomb fell. Not on us, or I should not be here to tell of it. Not even very close, thank God!—but close enough that its scream reached our ears like the far, faint cry of a wounded animal, the thunder of its blast numbing our senses. The earth beneath us rose and shook; we tumbled to the ground and clung there for a breathless moment, wondering dimly if there would follow another closer blow. A flaming radiance, a withering hell of heat . . .

Then Babacz was beside us, screaming orders into our deafened ears.

"This is it! The real thing. The Corps is hitting Fed-hed with an all-out attack. The Sackies are striking back with every interceptor rocket they have and we're caught in the line of fire! We've got to get out of here—fast!"

"Out? But where? How can we—"

"The *Phoenix*. It's sooner than we planned, but the old man says it's now or never. That's our only chance."

We hit the ramp on the run. The tube was a riot of confusion—crewmen and workers of our little band scurrying, luggage-laden, to their assigned quarters aboard the *Phoenix*. Others elbowed their way back outside to pick up material as yet unshipped, being turned back at the entrance by Frisbee, who stood there urging, shoving, bawling, "No more! Get to your assigned stations! No time for another load!"

His face was tense and strained. Some of its tenseness lifted as his eyes found us.

"Dana! Thank God! And Kerry! I didn't know where you were. The others reported you missing."

"We're all right. Harkrader aboard?"

"In the control turret. Join him there. I'll come as soon as the last one is in."

We hurried topside. Harkrader's creased face broke into a smile of relief at our appearance.

"Better strap down. The motor is warming. We take off as soon as Frisbee gets here."

I helped Dana into a percussion seat, saw to it that she was securely buckled for the blastaway, then harnessed myself into another of the chairs. I had just finished when a clang of metal signaled the closing of the last port. The thunder of bombing stopped abruptly. Until that moment I hadn't been aware of its incessant din, but now there was an almost ominous stillness punctuated only by the thin sighing of the air replenishment system.

I caught myself thinking with a curious detachment, this is impossible. This can't be happening to me. It is a dream, a nightmare. I will wake in a moment—

Then Frisbee was with us, moving swiftly to the pilot's seat. As he buckled himself into the pressure chair his eyes offered each of us a brief message of courage and hope. He said no word. There was no word to say. All of us knew what he was thinking. To stay was certain death—but a death we could understand on a world we knew. To go was—

We did not know. But the time had passed for fearing the unknown terrors of a strange world. It was too late to turn back.

Frisbee touched a button. There was no sound, but a massive hand reached forth and squeezed my chest—crushing, grinding, driving the breath from my lungs. The blood burned and sang in my brain, blotted my sight. The darkness—

## V

Here again the Grayson-McLeod manuscript breaks off. From this point on, the narrative becomes progressively more sketchy, more skimpy of details, more episodic, until its baffling and far from conclusive ending.

I deplore this fact, but there is nothing I can do about it. As a mere medium for its publication, I do not feel it is my right to make other than those few changes of continuity and phrase permitted me by Dr. Westcott.

The reader, therefore, must form his own determinations (as I have done for myself) as to the periods of time elapsed, the locales of the scenes so inadequately portrayed. And, above all, as to the meanings of these fragments.

—water. But I thought it would hold out until we reached our destination, now only a week distant if Frisbee's calculations were correct.

There was no food problem. Fresh and tinned goods had been shipped in quantity. We were not eating much, anyway. Everyone aboard was queasy with the vague disorder that troubled me, an indefinable squeamishness that made us all half drowsy and irritable, a fever for which there was no medicine because it was not caused by a germ. Just a dry, parched fretfulness, like that you feel after lying too long on a beach.

It was hard to believe we had been over four months in space. Looking back on it now, the wonder of those first excitement-filled days seems callow. Hard to realize that once we had gaped, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, at each new sight that offered.

Now we were acceptant to the fact that the space we voyaged through was deepest jet, not the sun-swept radiance we had thought in our ignorance it would be. Now we marveled no longer at the glory of the firm, unblinking stars as seen in airless space, unblanketed by a

stifling layer of atmosphere. We chilled no longer with terror when a flaming bullet as big as an earthly mountain loomed in our vision plates, boding to sweep us to oblivion in its furious, headlong chase. We had learned that in the vast emptiness of the gulf that stretches between the worlds, they are near neighbors which pass within a score of thousands of miles, and that the meteor so "closely" threatening us might be a full day's journey distant.

All this is not romantic, but it is true. I was a Corpsman; I was trained to observe and report the facts. Let the poets and dreamers sing of the wonders of spaceflight. I say simply and truthfully that the trip was uneventful; it was dull. There were no hours of day and night to dispel the monotony. Our ports looked out on a star-bright but everlasting night in which even the sun was but another burning star. One greater, brighter, then most, it is true, but still half the size it looks through earth's refracting mantle.

We did what any group will do that must live under a single roof, within entrapping walls, for more than a hundred days. We worked, we studied, we played. We slept and we ate. We talked of what lay before us and, less often, of what lay behind. We learned to know our shipmates as we had known few men and women in our lives. We became friends with some. We did not permit ourselves to become enemies with any. In the civilization we must create, hatred must be a word unknown.

And—since we were young and warm and alive—love rode the *Phoenix* with us. A boy and a girl, hands locked together, would come to Frisbee asking permission to marry. It was granted always, for as Frisbee said to me after one such ceremony, with a smile filled with understanding, "I will not argue the propriety of these marriages, on either a religious or a civil basis. But we have a new world to people, and one theological precept we



must never forget: be fruitful. If mankind is to endure, we must be fruitful and multiply."

It seemed as good a time as any to tell him about Dana and myself. He heard me with pleasure, and with no great surprise.

"I am glad, Kerry. I deeply and heartily approve." He laid his hand on my shoulder. "It is best and fitting that you should become my son, as Dana is my daughter. For one day you must lead this little band. I am an old man. I will not always be here to guide, encourage and instruct. You are best suited to the leadership I must one day relinquish.

"So—my blessing on you both. But—" He beamed. "We must have a celebration. A real one. I'll prepare a special banquet, with music and dan—"

—stood there stunned. Babacz rushed to the radio cabinet, frantically twisted dials. Uselessly. Where should have been voices was only the dry crackling of static. Where once had been music was silence. Our last, thin-drawn contact with Earth was gone.

My wife turned, and with a sob buried her head in my shoulder. I touched those dear bronze locks with hands that shook, and spoke to Frisbee through uncertain lips.

"It—it could be a technical fault, Professor. We are more than thirty million miles from Earth. Even Hert-zian transmission can go wrong."

He shook his head slowly, gravely.

"No, Kerry. Those last cries you heard, those last labored gasps, were the swan song of mankind on Earth. There will be no more messages from our native planet. Never. Not ever—in our lifetime."

Harkrader said, "You speak with terrible assurance, Dr. Frisbee. As if you had known this would happen."

"I did," said Frisbee sadly. "Forgive me. Forgive me, all my friends, if you can. I did know it would

happen. I learned the dreadful truth more than three years ago. That was when—and why—I gathered about me the children of this colony, and started building the *Phoenix*.

"I knew the comet would brush Earth this time. For a while I feared it would strike our old world head-on. Then I found the saving error in my calculations, learned that the head would graze, and the tail rake, the planet.

"It was not to be utter destruction, but it was bad enough. Once before, many thousands of years ago, a wayward comet grazed a civilized Earth. That civilization died. It took two thousands of decades to regain it."

"I read about that," said Babacz, "in one of the books we brought along. A writer named Bond, I think. But I thought it was only fiction. He wrote a lot of that stuff, most of it kind of crazy. I haven't read all his books yet, but—"

"All fantasy is not sheer dreaming. Much is truth, much more is simple logic. All men knew Halley's Comet was a potential source of danger. Or should have known if they had stopped to think. It almost brushed Earth on its last visit in 1910. Then, too, there were riots, outbursts of religious fanaticism, terror and awe. But to a lesser extent. To that extent which was a measure of the danger. Instincts are more sound than most men know. The very scope and violence of the Diarist movement was an indication that their fears were well grounded. They cried a day of judgment—and that day came."

"If I had only known," mourned Harkrader. "Frisbee, if I had known—"

"That is why I asked you to forgive me, John," said our leader. "I knew, but I told none of you—not even Dana, my own daughter—for I knew what your reaction would be. As men of Earth, you did not greatly fear leaving your homeland. Not so long as you knew it was

there to come back to. But if you had dreamed you were making a one-way voyage, a trip from which there was no return, you would not have come. You would have chosen to stay and suffer the fate of your fellow humans. So I deceived you."

"The others, Professor. Shall I tell the colony?" That was Warren. As a proven leader, he had taken his place in our council. He was a fine chap. His ingenious handling of that snake-vine problem had made possible the building of New Eden.

"I think it would be better not to, Dick. They are happy here. They are even happier in their belief that we will one day return to Earth. Let us not disturb that happiness."

"Dad," said Dana suddenly, "a while ago you said 'in our lifetime.' Do you mean by that the comet has not killed all life on Earth?"

"Exactly that, my dear. Many—perhaps millions—must have died in the first dreadful hours. The burning heat as the comet neared . . . the tidal waves and earthquakes . . . riots and panic . . . you heard about these before the messages ended.

"But man is a resourceful creature, and resilient. In Earth's bowels are many refuges. Mines, caverns, grottoes—even such manmade havens as deep-sea submarines and diving bells.

"In all of these, human life will persist; also in remote corners of the globe untouched by the comet's scourge. Lapland or Antarctica, Baffin Bay or Siberia. We do not know which face of Earth took the brunt of the blow, and which was spared."

"Then," I cried excitedly, "life *will* go on. And I think you are wrong, Professor. We can't stay here now. Our duty to our world, its people, demands that we go back and do what we can to help them. We can repair the *Phoenix*. It was not altogether ruined when we crashed. In a month or two—"

Frisbee shook his head sadly.

"No, Kerry. I still have not told you all. There is one thing more my observations of the comet revealed."

"Yes?"

"Its chemical nature. The elements that combine to form its gaseous envelope."

Harkrader said tremulously, "You mean it's—poisonous?"

"Not quite that, but the next worse thing. Unless my analysis is wholly in error—and from the dwindling gasps which were the last thing we heard from Earth I believe it is not—the gaseous composition of the comet was anaesthetic.

"I think," concluded Dr. Frisbee sadly, "that back on Earth our brothers sleep. Those who did not die rest in a drugged slumber that may last as long as a taint of the comet's breath mingles with the air of our native planet."

"Which may be—"

"Decades, Kerry."

"But then they'll *all* die! If they sleep and can't feed themselves—"

"I think not. There is a rather obscure gas in the comet's spectrum. Its peculiar property is that—"

—walked to the door and looked out. The towering weedlike trees of Venus, tops mantled in the eternal mists of cloud, rose like a green wall about that tiny cleared area we had so hopefully named New Eden.

For the first time since our crash-landing I felt a dreadful loneliness, a helplessness, an insecurity and fear I had not known since that boyhood day when I had been selected as a cadet from my sector and sent to the Island to train as a Corpsman.

Somewhere beyond those clouds, invisible to us forever in heavens we never glimpsed, must twinkle a bright, green, glowing orb—the Earth to which we could

never in our lifetimes return. For there men slept. And here . . .

Warren touched my arm. He spoke softly.

"He wants to see you, Kerry."

I nodded and went back to his room. Dana was still there. She had been crying soundlessly. She read the question in my eyes and shook her head. I moved to Frisbee's bedside, touched very gently the one hand unswathed in bandages. His eyes opened slowly and recognized me.

"Kerry. Kerry, my boy—"

"It's all right, chief," I said. "You mustn't talk now. You must be quiet and try to rest."

His words came muffled from beneath the gauze which encased his lips.

"There is no time for that now. The long rest lies before me, Kerry. Now I must know—"

He faltered, and I prompted him.

"Yes, chief?"

"The lodge. Was it completely destroyed?"

"I'm afraid so. But we'll rebuild it. Already the men are clearing ground for a bigger and better one."

"And the *Phoenix*? Did the fire ruin it, too?"

"It's pretty bad." I could not tell him how bad. I could not bring myself to tell him how the explosion of the auxiliary motor had seared and twisted the ship into a huddle of molten and fused parts.

"The supplies? The lab equipment? The seeds?"

"All saved, sir, thanks to you. We owe you a debt we can never repay."

I think he tried to smile. His eyes smiled until a grimace of pain closed them briefly.

"It was my dream," he said. "My colony. I want no payment. I have been repaid a thousand times over, seeing it grow and prosper. *For here—*" he said, and I felt that he was quoting an old, loved passage—"*For here shall I hew a paradise out of the virgin wild, and*



*I shall people it, and it shall be called the new Eden—*

"Father," said Dana, "you must not talk any longer. You must rest, now, and get back your strength."

He did not seem to hear her words. Once again his eyes were seeking mine.

"A new Eden," he whispered. "A new chance for man, here on man's last outpost. Kerry? Kerry, my son—"

"I'm here, chief."

"There is one thing that troubles me. I have never mentioned it before, but now I must. The—children? There have been no children. We have been here almost half a year, but still there are no children."

I glanced at Dana, and she at me. There was sorrow in her eyes, and a sort of terror. But when she answered her voice was strong and clear.

"Father—there will be children. Kerry and I . . . we have known . . . we wanted to surprise you. And others . . . some of the others, too."

Frisbee's voice was glad.

"Thank God! I was afraid it was the hard radiation aboard the *Phoenix*. Even in laboratories on earth, sterility was caused by gamma rays. I feared the rays of space. All of us were sick, you remember. But I guess it was only temporary."

"We'll have a feast," I said with forced cheerfulness. "When the first child is born we'll all—"

"That was to be my next project," he continued. "I think there is an answer to the gene injury caused by gamma rays. Once, in a series of experiments, I stumbled across a curious reaction. I found that pure vitamin A seems to stimulate the damaged regenerative cells. Not vitamin E, as might logically be expected, but the anti-xerophthalmiac vitamin A. I had intended to synthesize this vitamin, try injections—"

His voice was getting weaker by the moment.

"But there will be no need of that now. There will be children. The race of man will go on. I am content."

He reached out feebly, in turn touching each of our hands. "Now I will rest," he whispered. "God bless and protect you all."

He closed his eyes. He did not open them again. I think, though, that his last rest was a happy one . . .

When we had drawn the blinds and left the room, our need for acting ended. In my arms, Dana gave way at last to tears.

"Kerry, I lied to him. I lied to my father. I never did that before. But I had to, didn't I?"

I soothed her as best I could. "You did the only thing you could do. He was happy at the end, believing your lie. Why should he know—" I could not keep the bitterness from my voice— "Why should he know his fear was based on truth? That there are no children . . . will not be any children . . . cannot be any children in our hopeless and sterile Eden."

"But, Kerry—the hint he gave you? The injections of vitamin A. Can't we try that? Couldn't we—"

"Do you," I asked her almost harshly, "know the formula for vitamin A?"

"Well, no, but—"

"And have you forgotten," I cried, "that our entire reference library was destroyed in the fire that cost him his life? No, Dana, it's no use. The race of man has turned its final milepost. Earth sleeps. And we of its last outpost are doomed to a slow but certain oblivion."

She turned away then and—

"—don't say there is, but there could be."

Babacz looked a little sheepish.

"I know I wasn't supposed to take any from the library. But I did. Like I told you, I got kind of interested. Especially in those science-fiction stories. I guess Frisbee must have been, too. He had scads of them. And

I'd transferred a lot, maybe half of them, to my own quarters before the explosion.

"I'm sorry if I did wrong, Kerry. I didn't mean any harm. And when I heard what you just told Harkrader—"

"Wrong!" I cried. "Babacz, you may have committed the noblest crime in the history of the human race! Let's see those precious books of yours. There's a bare chance—"

—most part utterly meaningless. Lurid, fanciful, melodramatic tales of adventure on planets of our solar system, and even on worlds many light-years away. Some are utterly ridiculous, like one that portrayed Venus as being a jungle world peopled by weird, intelligent, spiderlike creatures. He was a fool who wrote that story. Here we have found nothing so incredible as the life forms he invented. Only the echo-plants and the landfish are in any way foreign to our Earthly minds. I do not believe that, as Warren and a few of the others claim, the nightwalkers have intelligence. No vegetable *thinks*. And I'm sure their supposed "whispering" is just the rustling of the wind through their curiously craniumlike seed pods. But despite that we must repair that south gate. I don't believe we should risk another accident like that which happened last week. It upsets the colony. Klein swears they attacked him . . .

But I was talking about the books. It is true that most of them are completely useless. They are silly romances in a frame of pseudo-science. But there are others which are more carefully conceived and written, stories which are based on hard and definite scientific facts. One of these could, just barely and possibly could, contain the clue we need.

Those writers, after all, had access to many books, to facts lost to us when our reference library was de-

stroyed. If one of them—just one of them—had been inspired to base fiction tale on vitamins, and in that story had written the all-important structural formula for vitamin A—

—her cheek against mine.

"You've got to come to bed, Kerry. You're tired; I know you're tired."

Reluctantly I closed the book, tossed it with those many, many others I had plowed through in vain. The shelf of useless books was growing ever longer, the group in which lay our last hope was becoming smaller, maddeningly smaller. All but a few of the bound books I had read. There remained some old ones. *Really* old ones, I mean. Some of them were thirty or forty years out of print. The Professor had been quite a collector of that sort of thing. On Earth, in a happier day, his accumulation would have been prized by a museum.

"No luck?" asked Dana.

I shook my head. "None."

"Perhaps they didn't know," she suggested. "Those books are very old. Perhaps in those early days—"

"Oh, they knew!" I answered savagely. "I've read a hundred references to vitamins. But never one notation of the actual formula. You see, that knowledge was commonplace to them. Why should they make special mention of details available in any standard book of reference?"

"How could they guess," I cried, "how terribly and desperately we need that simple fact? We have the raw elements here; we have the lab equipment. We can synthesize anything—but we don't know where to begin in creating that one thing that can save our colony."

"The knowledge is lost. And *we* are lost unless the answer lies somewhere in these last few—"

*Here, abruptly as it began, concludes the narrative of Kerry McLeod.*

I find it hard to explain my own (perhaps weakling) response to this manuscript, and to the demand of Dr. Arthur Westcott.

Let me say immediately and frankly that I fear I am the victim of either an awesomely elaborate practical joke, or of the auctorial ambitions of a man now known only as a doctor.

I do not believe this narrative to be true. I cannot accept or endorse its facts, its theories, its completely implausible prophecy as to mankind's future history and fate. These things are too fantastic. And yet—

And yet a reading of my encyclopedia tells me that Halley's Comet *will* revisit Earth in 1985. It tells me also that this baleful body's last visitation in 1910 *did* foment religious hysteria, rioting and furor and (some think) the horrors of the first World War that followed closely after.

I remind myself that Grayson is an inmate of a hospital for the mentally deranged, and with this as reassurance, it seems relatively meaningless that his own script should be so different from that of Kerry McLeod.

Yet it is true that even as I write, foresighted men of good will throughout this squabbling world are arguing for a worldwide union of nations—a federation to be implemented by an armed international police corps. Is it absurd to fear that such an organization could rise and assume the powers of world government? I think not.

Still, I do not believe in this manuscript. But on one point I *do* agree with Dr. Westcott. That I dare not take a chance on the fallibility of my own judgment.

"You dare not refuse," he told me. "For on its telling may depend the fate of all mankind. . . ."

The last of all weird coincidences: my name appears

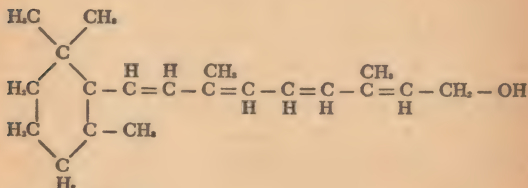


in this narrative. That is flattery of a dubious nature, but it is a fact that forces upon me the obligation of presenting this tale under my by-line.

Because there is a slim chance that somehow this story may be true. Because there is a faint hope that the book in which this story is printed may lie, still unread, in that dwindling pile through which McLeod so desperately searches.

Therefore—though I suspect that in so doing I am making a final and utter fool of myself—I offer here that clue you are seeking: the formula which may mean life or death to Earth's last outpost.

Here, Kerry McLeod, is the structural chemical formula for synthesizing vitamin A:



*Be fruitful, sons of Earth, and multiply. . . .*

*The Bird of Time has but a little way  
To fly, and lo! the Bird is on the wing.*

Fitzgerald—Rubáiyát

## AND LO! THE BIRD

I don't know why I'm bothering to write this. It's undoubtedly the most useless bit of writing I've ever done in a career devoted to defacing reams of clean copy paper with torrents of fatuous words. But I've got to do something to keep my mind occupied, and since I was in this from the beginning, I might as well set it down as I remember it.

Of course, my record of those first days makes no difference now. But, then, nothing matters much now. Perhaps nothing ever really mattered much, actually. I don't know. I'm not very sure about anything any more. Except that this is an absurdly unimportant story for me to be writing. And that somehow I must do it, nonetheless. . . .

I've said I was in this from the beginning. That's a laugh. How long ago it really started is any man's guess. It depends on how you choose to measure time. Some four thousand years ago, if you're a fundamentalist adherent to Archbishop Usher's chronology. Perhaps three thousand million years ago, if you have that which until a few short weeks ago we used to speak of vaingloriously as "a scientific mind."

I don't know the truth of the matter, nor does any-

one else, but so far as I'm concerned it started about a month ago. On the night our City Editor, Smitty, wigwagged me to his desk and grunted a query at me.

"Do you know anything about astronomy?" he asked a bit petulantly.

"Sure," I told him. "Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and something-or-other."

"How?" frowned Smitty.

"And Pluto," I remembered. "The solar family. The planets in the order of their distance from the sun. I had a semester of star-gazing at school. Some of it rubbed off."

"Good," said the C.E. "You've just won yourself an assignment. Do you know Dr. Abramson?"

"I know who he is. The big wheel on the university observatory staff."

"That's right. Well, go see him. He's got something big—*he* says," appended Smitty.

"Cab?" I asked hopefully.

"Bus."

"Astronomically speaking," I suggested, "a big story could mean a lot of things. A comet striking earth. The heat of the sun failing and letting us all freeze to death."

"Things are tough all over," shrugged Smitty. "The suburban buses run every twenty minutes until midnight."

"On the other hand," I mused, "he may have run into some meteorological disturbance that means atomic experiment. If the Reds are playing around with an H-bomb—"

"Okay, a cab," sighed Smitty. "Get going."

Abramson was a small, slim, sallow man with shadowed eyes. He shook my hand and motioned me into a chair across the yellow oak desk from him, ad-

justed a gooseneck lamp so it would shine in neither of our faces, then steepled lean white fingers. He said, "It was good of you to come so promptly, Mr.—"

"Flaherty," I told him.

"Well, Flaherty, it's like this. In our profession it isn't customary to release stories through the press. As a rule, we publish our observations in technical journals comprehensible, for the most part, only to specialists. But this time such treatment does not seem adequate. It might not be fast enough. I've seen something in the heavens—and I don't like it."

I made hēn scratches on a fold of copy paper.

"This thing you saw? A new comet, maybe?"

"I'm not sure that I know," said Abramson, "and I'm even less sure I *want* to know. But whatever it is, it's unusual enough and, I suspect, important enough to warrant the step I'm taking. In order to get the swiftest possible confirmation of my observations, and of my fears, I feel I must use the public press to tell my message."

"All the news that's fit to print," I said, "and a lot that isn't; that's our stock in trade. What is it you've seen?"

He stared at me sombrely for a long minute. Then:

"A bird," he said.

I glanced at him in swift surprise. "A bird?" I felt like smiling, but the look in his eyes did not encourage mirth.

"A bird," he repeated. "Far in the depths of space. The telescope was directed toward Pluto, farthestmost planet of our solar system. A body almost four thousand millions of miles from Earth.

"And at that distance—" he spoke with a painful deliberation—"at that incredible distance, I saw a bird!"

Maybe he read the disbelief in my eyes. Anyway, he opened the top drawer of his desk, drew forth a sheaf of 8x10 glossies, and laid them before me.

"Here," he said. "See for yourself."

The first photograph meant little to me. It showed a field of star-emblazoned space—the typical sort of picture you find in any astronomy textbook. But on it one square was outlined in white pencil. The second photo was an enlargement of this square, showing in magnified detail the outlined area. The field was larger, brighter; a myriad of glowing stars diffused a silvery radiance over the entire plate. Against this nebulosity stood out in stark relief the firm, jet silhouette of a gigantic birdlike creature in full flight.

I ventured an uncertain attempt at rationalization. I said, "Interesting. But, Dr. Abramson, many dark spots have been photographed in space. The Coalsack, for instance. And the black nebula in—"

"True," he acknowledged. "But if you will look at the next exposure?"

I turned to the third photograph, and for the first time felt the breath of that thin, cold, helpless dread which in the weeks ahead was to come to dwell with me. It depicted an overlapping portion of that field surveyed in the second print. But the dark, occulting silhouette had changed. That which was limned against the background of the stars was still the outline of a bird—but the shape had changed. A wing which had been lifted now was dropped; the postures of neck and head and bill were subtly but definitely altered.

"This photograph," said Abramson in a dry, emotionless voice, "was taken five minutes after the first one. Disregarding the changed appearance of the—the image—and considering only the object's relative position in space, as indicated by the parallax, to have shifted its position to such an extent in so short a time indicates that the thing casting that image must have been traveling at a velocity of approximately one hundred thousand miles per minute."



"What!" I exclaimed. "But that's impossible. Nothing on earth can travel at such a speed."

"Nothing on *earth*," agreed Abramson. "But cosmic bodies can—and do. And for all that it has the semblance of a living creature, this thing—whatever it is—is a cosmic body."

"And that," he continued fretfully, "is why I asked you to come out here. That is the story I want you to write. That is why no moment must be wasted."

I said, "I can write the story, but it will never be believed."

"Perhaps not—at first. Nevertheless, it must be released. The public may laugh if it chooses. Other observatories will check my discovery, verify my conclusions. And that is the important thing. No matter what it may lead to, what it means, we must learn the truth. The world has a right to know the threat confronting it."

"Threat? You think there is a threat?"

He nodded slowly, gravely.

"Yes, Flaherty. I know there is. There is a thing these pictures may not tell you, but that will be recognized instantly by any trained mathematician."

"That thing—bird, beast, machine, or whatever it may be—travels in a computable path. And the direction of its flight is—toward our sun!"

My interview threw Smitty for a loss. He read copy swiftly, scowled, studied the pix, and read the story again, this time more slowly and with furrows congealing on his forehead. Then he stalked over to my desk.

"Flaherty," he complained in a tone of outraged indignation, "what is all this? What the hell is it, I mean?"

"A story," I told him. "The story you sent me out to get. Abramson's story."

"I know that. But—a bird! What the hell kind of a story is that?"

I shrugged. "Frankly, I don't know. Dr. Abramson seemed to think it's important. Maybe," I suggested, "he's got rocs in his head?"

It was too subtle for Smitty. He smudged the bridge of his nose with a copy pencil and muttered something uncomplimentary to astronomers in general and Abramson in particular.

"I suppose we've got to print it," he decided. "But we don't have to make damned fools of ourselves. Lighten this up. If we must run it, we'll play it for laughs."

So that's what we did. We carried it on an inside page, complete with Abramson's pictures, as a special feature, gently humorous in tone. We didn't openly poke fun at Abramson, of course. He was, after all, the observatory chief of staff. But we soft-pedaled the science angle. I rewrote the yarn in the style we generally use for flying saucer reports and sea serpent stories.

Which was, of course, a terrific boner. But in all fairness to Smitty, how was *he* to know this was the story to end all stories? The biggest story of his or any newspaperman's career?

Think back to the first time *you* read about it, and be honest. Did you guess, then, that it was gospel truth?

We soon discovered our mistake. Reaction to the yarn was swift and startling. The *Banner* had been on the streets less than an hour when the phones began to ring.

That, in itself, was not unusual. Any out-of-the-ordinary story brings its quota of cranks crawling forth from the woodwork. Discount the confirmation of the local amateur observer who called in to verify Abramson's observation. His possibly lucid report was over-

shadowed by the equally sincere, but considerably less credible, reports of a dozen naked-eye "witnesses" who also averred to have seen a gigantic birdlike creature soaring across the heavens during the night. Half of these described the markings of the bird; one even claimed to have heard its mating call.

Two erstwhile civilian defense aircraft spotters called to identify the object variously, but with equal assurance, as a B-29 and a Russian superjet. A member of the Audubon Society identified the bird as a ruby-throated nuthatch which, he suggested, must have flown in front of the telescope just as the camera clicked. An itinerant preacher of an obscure cult marched into our office to inform us with savage delight that this was the veritable bird foretold in the book of Revelations, and that the end of the world could now be expected momentarily, if not sooner.

These were the lunatic fringe. What was unusual was that all the calls which flooded our office during the next twenty-four hours were not made by screwballs and fanatics. Some were of great importance, not only to their instigators but to the scientific world, and to mankind in general.

We had fed a take to the Associated Press. To our astonishment, from that syndicate we received an immediate demand for follow-up material, including copies of Abramson's pix. The national picture magazines were even more on their toes. They flew their own boys to town and had contacted Abramson for a second story before we wised up to the fact that we had broken the number-one sensation of the year.

Meanwhile, and most important of all, astronomers elsewhere throughout the world set their big eyes for the arean of the thing first spotted by Dr. Abramson. And within twenty-four hours, to the stunned dismay of all who, like Smitty and myself, had seen it as a terrific joke, verifications were forthcoming from every

observatory that enjoyed good viewing conditions. What's more, mathematicians verified Abramson's estimates as to the thing's speed and trajectory. The bird, estimated to be larger in size than any solar planet, was conceded to be somewhere in the vicinity of Pluto—and approaching our sun at a speed of 145,000,000 miles per day!

By the end of the first week, the bird was visible through any fair-sized telescope. The story snowballed, and in its rolling picked up all the oddments lying in its path. A character who introduced himself as a member of the Fortean Society—whatever that is—came to the office armed with a thick volume in which he pointed out to us a dozen paragraphs purporting to prove that similar dark objects had been seen in the skies above various parts of the world over a period of several hundred years.

The central council of the P.T.A. issued a plaintive statement deploring scare-journalism and its evil effects on the youth of our nation. The Daughters of the American Revolution passed a resolution branding the strange image a new secret weapon of the Kremlin's lads, and urging that immediate steps—undefined but drastic—be taken by the authorities. A special committee of the local ministers' association called to advise us that the story we had originated tended to undermine the religious faith of the community; they demanded that we print a full retraction of the hoax in the earliest possible edition.

Which was, by this time, a complete impossibility. Before the end of the second week, the black dot in the skies could be viewed with binoculars. By the middle of the third week it had reached the stage of naked-eye visibility. Crowds gathered in the streets when this became known, and those with good eyesight professed to be able to discern the rhythmic rise and fall

of those tremendous wings, now familiar to all because of the scores of photographs which by this time had appeared in every newspaper and magazine of any importance.

The cadenced beating of those monstrous wings was but one of the many inexplicable—or at least unexplained—mysteries about the creature from beyond. Vainly a few diehard physicists pointed out that wings are of no propulsive help in airless void, that alate flight is possible only where there are wind currents to lift and carry. The thing flew. And whether its gigantic pinions beat, as some men thought, on an interstellar atmosphere unguessed by Earthly science, or whether they stroked against beams of light or quantum bundles, as others contended, these were meaningless quibbles in the face of that one, stark, incontrovertible fact: the thing flew.

With the dawning of the fourth week, the bird from outer space reached Jupiter and dwarfed it—an ominous black interloper equal in size to any cosmic neighbor man had ever seen.

I sat alone with Abramson in his office. Abramson was tired and, I think, a little ill. His smile was not a success, nor had his words their hoped-for jauntiness.

"Well, I got what I wanted, Flaherty," he admitted. "I wanted swift action, and got it. Though what good it is, I don't know. The world recognizes its danger now, and is helpless to do anything about it."

"It has hurdled the asteroids," I said. "Now it's approaching Mars, and is still moving sunward. Everyone is asking, though, why doesn't its presence within the system raise merry hob with celestial mechanics? By all known laws it should have thrown everything out of balance. A creature of that size, with its gravitational attraction—"

"You're still thinking in old terms, my boy. Now we



are confronted with something strange and new. Who knows what laws may govern the Bird of Time?"

"The Bird of Time? I seem to have heard that phrase."

"Of course." He quoted moodily, "The Bird of Time has but a little way to fly—and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing."

"The *Rubáiyát*," I remembered.

"Yes. Omar was an astronomer, you know, as well as a poet. He must have known—or guessed—something of this." Abramson gestured wanly skyward. "Indeed, many of the ancients seem to have known something about it. I've been doing a lot of research during these past weeks, Flaherty. It is amazing how many references there are in the old writings to a great bird of space—statements which until recently did not seem to be at all significant or important, but which now hold a greater and graver meaning for us."

"Such as?"

"Culture myths," he said. "Legends. The records of a hundred vanished races. The Mayan myth of the space-swallow, the Toltec quetzlcoatl, the Russian fire-bird, the phoenix of the Greeks."

"We don't know yet," I argued, "that it is a bird." He shrugged.

"A bird, a giant mammal, a pterodactyl, some similar creature on a cosmic scale—what does it matter? Perhaps it is a life-form foreign to anything we know, something we can only try to name in earthly terms, describe by earthly analogies. The ancients called it a bird. The Phoenicians worshipped the 'bird that was, and is again to be.' The Persians wrote of the fabulous roc. There is an Aramaic legend of the giant bird that rules—and spawns—the worlds."

"Spawns the worlds?"

"Why else should it be coming?" he inquired. "Does its great size mean nothing to you?" He stared at me

thoughtfully for a moment. Then: "Flaherty," he asked strangely, "what is the earth?"

"Why," I replied, "the world we live on. A planet."

"Yes. But what is a planet?"

"A unit of the solar system. A part of the sun's family."

"Do you *know* that? Or are you simply parroting things you were taught in school?"

"The latter, of course. But what else could it be?"

"Our earth could be," he answered reluctantly, "no part of the sun's family at all. Many theories have been devised, Flaherty, to explain earth's place in this tiny segment of the universe which we call the solar system. None of them are provably inaccurate. But on the other hand, none are demonstrably true.

"There is the nebular hypothesis: the theory that earth and its sister planets were born of a contracting sun. Were, in fact, small globules of solar matter left to cool in orbits deserted by their condensing parent. A late refinement of this theory makes us the product of materials derived from a sister sun, once twin to our own orb.

"The planetesimal and tidal theories each are based on the assumption that unfathomable eons ago another sun bypassed our own, and that the planets are the offspring of that ancient, flaming rendezvous in space.

"Each of these theories has its proponents and its opponents; each has its verifications and denials. None can be wholly proven or refuted.

"But—" he stirred restlessly—"there is another possibility which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been expounded. Yet it is equally valid to any I have mentioned. And in the light of that which we now know, it seems to me more likely than any other.

"It is that earth and its sister planets have nothing whatever to do with the sun. That they are not, nor ever were, mere members of its family. That the sun in our skies is simply a convenience."

"Convenience?" I frowned. "Convenience for what?"

"For the bird," said Abramson unhappily. "For the great bird which is our parent. Flaherty, can you conceive that our sun may be a cosmic incubator. And that the world on which we live may be merely—an egg?"

I stared at him. "An egg! Fantastic!"

"You think so? You can look at the pictures, read the stories in the magazines, see the approaching bird with your own eyes, and still think there exists anything more incredible than that which has befallen us?"

"But an egg! Eggs are egg-shaped. Ovoid."

"The eggs of some birds are ovoid. But those of the plover are pear-shaped, those of the sand-grouse cylindrical, those of the grebe biconical. There are eggs shaped like spindles and spears. The eggs of owls, and of mammals, are generally spheroid. As is the earth."

"But eggs have shells!"

"As does our earth. Earth's crust is but forty miles thick—a layer for a body of its size comparable in every respect to the shell of an egg. Moreover, it is a smooth shell. Earth's greatest height is Mount Everest, some thirty thousand feet; its greatest depth is Swire Deep in the Pacific, thirty-five thousand. A maximum variation of about twelve miles. To feel these irregularities on a twelve-inch model of the earth you would need the delicate fingers of the blind, because the greatest height protrudes but the hundred and twentieth part of an inch, and the lowest depth is but one hundredth part of an inch below its surface."

"Still," I argued desperately, "you can't be right. You've overlooked the most important fact. Eggs hold life! Eggs contain the fledglings of the creature that spawned them. Eggs crack open and—"

I stopped abruptly. Abramson nodded, creaking back and forth in his ancient swivel chair, the creaking a

monotonous rhythm to his nodding. There was sadness in his eyes and in his voice.

"Even so," he said wearily. "Even so . . ."

So that was the second great story which I broke. I was still fool enough to get a bang out of it at the time; I don't feel the same way about it now. But, then, I don't feel the same about anything any more. I guess you can understand that. The coming of the bird was such a big thing, such a truly big thing, that it dwindled into insignificance all the things we used to consider great, important, world-shaking.

World-shaking!

I'll make it brief. There's so little purpose to my telling of this story. But there may be in it, here and there, a fact you do not know. And I've got to do something—anything—to keep myself from thinking.

You remember that grim fourth week, and the steady approach of the bird. We had settled for calling it that by then. We were not sure if it were bird or winged beast, but men think—and give names to things—in terms of familiar objects. And that slim black shape with its tremendous wings, its taloned legs and long, cruel, curving beak, looked more like a bird than an animal.

Besides, there was Abramson's world-egg theory to be considered. The people, hearing this, doubted it with a furious hope—but feared it might be true. Men in high positions asked what could be done. They sent for Abramson, and he advised them. He could be wrong, he acknowledged. But if he were right, there was only one hope for salvation. The life within Earth must be stilled.

"I believe," he told a special emergency committee appointed by the President, "the bird has come to hatch the brood of young it deposited God knows how many centuries ago about that incubating warmth which is our sun. Its wisdom or its instinct tells it that the

time of emergence is now; it has come to help its fledglings shed their shells.

"But we know that mother birds, alone and unaided, do not hatch their young. They will aid a struggling chick to crack its shell, but they will never begin the liberating action. With an uncanny second sense, they seem to know which eggs have failed to develop life within them. Such eggs they never disturb.

"Therein, gentlemen, lies our only hope. The shell of Earth is forty miles in thickness. We have our engineers and technicians; we have the atomic bomb. If mankind is to live, the host to which we are but parasites must die. That is my only solution. I leave the rest to you."

He left them, still wrangling, in Washington, and returned home. He saw little hope, he told me the next day, of their reaching any firm decision in sufficient time to act. Abramson, I think, had already resigned himself to the inevitable, had with a wan grimace surrendered mankind to its fate. He said once that bureaucracy had achieved its ultimate destiny. It had throttled itself to death with its own red tape.

And still the bird moved sunward. On the twenty-eighth day it made its nearest approach to Earth, and passed us by. I don't know—nor can the scientists explain—why our globe was not shattered by the gravitational attraction of that gigantic mass. Perhaps because the Newtonian theory is, after all, simply a theory, and has no actuality in fact. I don't know. If there were time it would be good to resurvey the facts and learn the truth about such things. At any rate, all things considered, we suffered very little from its nearness. There were high tides and mighty winds; those sections of earth subject to earthquakes suffered some mild tremors. But that is all.

Then we won a respite. You remember how the bird paused in its headlong flight to hover for two full



days about that tiniest of the solar planets—the one we call Mercury. Briefly, as if searching for something, it flew in a wide circle in an orbit between Mercury and the sun.

Abramson believed it *was* looking for something. For something it could not find because it was no longer there. Astronomers believed, said Abramson, that at one time there had been another planet circling between Mercury and the sun. Some watchers of the sky had seen this at late as the Eighteenth Century, and had called it Vulcan. Vulcan had disappeared; perhaps had fallen into the sun. So thought Abramson. And so, apparently, the bird decided, too, for after a fruitless search it winged its way outward from the sun to approach the closest of its brood still remaining intact.

Must I remind you of that dreadful day? I think not. No man alive will ever forget what he saw then. The bird approaching Mercury, pausing to hover motionless above a planet which seemed a mote beneath the umbra of those massive wings. Men in the streets saw this. I saw more, for I stood beside Abramson in the university observatory, watching that scene with the aid of a telescope.

I saw the first thin splitting of Mercury's shell, and the curious fluid ichor which seeped from a dying world. I watched the grisly emergence of that small, wet, scrawny thing—raw simulacrum of its monstrous parent—from the egg in which it had lain for whatever incalculable era was the gestation period of a creature vast as space and old as time. I saw the mother bird stretch forth its giant beak and help its fledgling rid itself of a peeling, needless shell; stood horrified to watch the younger bird emerge and flap its new, uncertain wings, drying them in the burning rays of the star which had been its incubator.

And I saw the shredded remnants of a world spiral into the sun which was its pyre.

It was then, at last, that mankind woke to action. The doubters were finally convinced, those who had argued against the "needless expense" and folly of Abramson's plan were silenced. Forgotten now were selfishness and greed, political differences and departmental strife. The world it infested trembled on the brink of doom—and a race of vermin battled for its life.

In the flat desertland of America was frantically thrown together the mechanism for mankind's greatest project—Operation Life. To this desert flew the miners, the construction engineers, the nuclear physicists, the men skilled in deep-drilling operations. There they began their task, working night and day with a speed which heretofore had been called impossible. There they are working now, this minute, as I write, fighting desperately against each passing second of time, striving with every means and method they know to reach and destroy, before the bird comes, the life within our world.

A week ago the bird moved on to Venus. Throughout these seven days we have watched its progress there. We cannot see much through the eternal veil of mist which surrounds our sister planet, so we do not know what has for so gratefully long a time occupied the bird. Whatever it is, we are thankful for it. We wait and watch. And as we watch, we work. And as we work, we pray. . . .

So there is no real ending to this story. As I said before, I don't know why I'm bothering to write it. The answer is not ready to be given. If we succeed, there will be ample time to tell the tale properly—the whole great story, fully documented, of the battle being waged on the hot Arizona sands. And if we fail—well, then there will be no reason for this writing. There will none to read it.

The bird is not the greatest of our fears. If when it comes from Venus it finds here a quiet, lifeless, un-

responsive shell, it will move outward—we believe and pray—to Mars, then Jupiter, and thence beyond.

That is the end we hope to bring about. Soon, now, our probing needles will penetrate Earth's shell, will dip beneath the crust and into the tegument of that horror which sleeps within us.

But we have another more tormenting fear. It is that before the mother bird approaches us the fledgling may awake and seek to gain its freedom from the shell encasing it. If this should happen, Abramson has warned, our work must then proceed at lightning speed. For let that fledgling once begin to knock, then it must die—or all mankind is doomed.

That is the other reason why I write. To keep from thinking thoughts I dare not think. Because:

Because early this morning, Earth began to knock. . . .

## THIS IS THE LAND

*This is the land which ye Shall divide by lot. And  
neither division nor unity Matters. This is the land.  
We have our inheritance.*

T. S. Eliot: *Ash Wednesday*

I wonder what it feels like to be dead?

It is cold; that I know. Our father's flesh was cold when at the last we bore him, as he had enjoined, up the long winding ramps and lifting clines; through the great caverns and the massive locks that, as we left them, wheezed asthmatic sighs into the wider corridors beyond; out past the tangled webs of flame-scorched steel and crumbled stone to the vast silence of the bleak Outside.

There in the hollow of a cratered plain, where each unlevel thing etched shadows sharp and jet against the fierce white fury of the sands, we scratched for him a final resting place. And there, as he had bade, we buried him. Despite the searing sunlight, he was cold. His flesh was cold; so were those lips and eyes that ever had been warm with kindness.

We were four who bore our father on his last journey. The others all were younger than myself. With staring wonder and a speechless awe they gaped about them at the strange Outside. They felt, I think, a troubling sort of dread.

But I felt more, for I had read the books. And so I knew a sorrow and regret. For in the old writings I had journeyed here before, had seen this land as it had

used to be. In my mind's roaming I had looked upon the fields of rippling grass, had seen the rainbow myriad of flowers curtseying and swaying in the summer breeze, had glimpsed the swift, heartstopping flight of birds curving like gaudy darts across the sky to light and sway, sure-footed, rich with song, upon the frothing boughs of green-gowned trees.

But now all this was gone. The earth was bare. No brooks ran purling through these bitter wastes. Here were no pastures, forests, meadowlands. Only the harsh raw tegument of earth remained. Like gaunt, bleached skulls of stone, bare rocks upthrust from sterile dunes of sand. Dried beds of vanished streams carved meaningless deep symbols in the plain. And overhead, a huge sky-quartering sun burned down in naked fury on a crust split with great scars, pockmarked with detritus, and seamed with scabs of metal molten, then congealed.

All, all, was silence. No wind stirred the waste. No sound of nature whispered nature's dirge. And no bird sang.

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and  
wattles made;*

*Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for  
the honey bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*

This was the sort of song they used to sing.

"It will not last forever, our imprisonment." Thus said my father once. "Now we are forced to dwell beneath the earth, a helpless race of new-world troglodytes. Here we must live because we have no choice. But in the great, wise fullness of God's time, you will go forth again one day. One day again there will be



green on earth. One day again, grant God, there will be life . . .”

“It is finished?” asked the youngest of my brothers. The grave was dug, our father placed therein, the last slow shovelful of sifting sand had filled the fresh scar on oft-wounded earth. The mound already blended with the plain. I shook my head.

“Not yet,” I said. “Not yet.” I opened the volume I had brought Outside. The straight black lines of printing marched in bold relief against the clean bone-whiteness of the page. “We are to read the book, our father said. Within it, he has marked the passages.”

My brothers bowed their heads, as had been taught. I read the words to them, and to the mound.

*By the waters of Babylon  
There we sat down, yea, we wept,  
When we remembered Zion.*

You will not easily believe these things (my father said), but they are true. They are written in the books for you to read. Men lie, but books do not. Men cheat, but pictures tell the truth. In the books you will find pictures of the world which we had built.

We had great cities, dotting all the earth. Cities with buildings reaching to the sky, spires of stone and glass and shining steel. They glowed with life by day and light by night; beneath the rooftops of their countless homes mankind laid plans for great accomplishments, or privately dreamed dreams of new success and happiness.

We were a race of moonstruck engineers, of work-ants who builded as we dreamed. Our wide, long highways spanned the miles between our busiest hives; our bridges hurtled rivers; if there were mountains standing

in our way we bored a die-straight passage through their hearts.

Giddy with knowledge, overwhelmed with pride, we had subjected nature to our needs. Our swift trains crossed wide continents on shining rails, our ocean-going vessels were manmade islands. The air was our domain. Nature herself had made no bird so powerful as those sky-giants in which we dared not just the clouds, but the thin air above the atmosphere.

There is too much to tell; I will not try. But if you can, imagine two billion restless souls bustling about in never-ending search for knowledge, greater luxury—always the newer, finer, larger thing. That will give you some idea of how we lived. The world itself was not enough for us. In my young manhood, eyes turned toward the stars. The first experimental rockets had been launched. It was believed by every thinking man that within twenty years, or more or less, Earth's children would set foot upon the moon.

All the old foes of man—save one—we had subdued. Famine and poverty we held in check. The elements were harnessed to our will: earth, fire, air and water bowed before our scientific cunning and our skill. In spotless halls of healing we conspired to restrain the ravages of plague and pestilence; in the last double decade of our greatness we had lengthened man's life span more than thirty years. Thus we had checked all mankind's greatest foes. Save one. That one was man himself.

We had probed nature's secrets. But one thing we had not learned. We had not learned humility. We had not learned to live together.

There were three wars, each greater than the last, each longer than the one preceding it. The first was fought in the old-fashioned way: man against man, brute force against brute force. But there were innovations. At its end, for the first time we dipped into our

new arsenal of scientific lore. We pitted steel against weak flesh and blood; the clash of sword on shield was drowned beneath the roar of long-range guns and rumbling tanks. We fought with gas and flame; into the air we hurled our early, awkward birds of prey. This was the last great battle of the brutes.

The second was a laboratory war. Each side had its armies, but the decisive battles were not waged in the field. The victories were won in tiny rooms where men drew diagrams and plotted formulae. Man-governed seacraft had no chance against robot-controlled projectiles of destruction. It was a war of rockets, radar, reason. The hand of death fell heaviest upon those who wore no uniforms and bore no arms. Its prelude was a shrill, hysterical voice screaming wild threats around the world on unseen wires of electric force; its curtain was a greasy pall of smoke mushrooming over the ruin of what had been a city. This was the last great battle of the people.

The third was the most curious war of all, because most fighters in its ranks did not know they had been conscripted. It was a war of minds and of ideas, of overtones and psychic influence. It was fought with phrases, spoken and implied; with arguments and coldly chosen words. It was a bloodless war—if that war can be called bloodless which leaves its wounds only upon the hearts and minds of men. It was the most deadly of the three great wars because it took its toll on all mankind: the rich, the poor, the humble and the proud; the old, the young, the weaklings and the strong; inexorably and indiscriminately, alike.

For long spans of years no man encountered sudden, brutal death upon a battleground. But no man knew a complete happiness. For ever there was strife and bickering, troubling disquiet and a never ending fear. Uncertainty and doubt were the weapons of this

war, furrowed brows its chevrons, sick hearts its wound stripes. This was the last great battle of the minds.

The final war was not a war at all. Rather, it was the inevitable consequence of that dejection into which the third, the war of nerves, had plunged mankind. It was a last wild gesture of despair. It was race suicide impelled by years of dread, achieved in seconds of fury.

Somewhere a finger pressed a button, a contact closed. And in an instant, earth and sky were a ball of flame. This was the last great battle of mankind . . .

*"I will utterly consume all things  
From off the land," saith the Lord.  
"I will consume man and beast,  
I will consume the fowls of the heaven,  
and the fishes of the sea,  
And the stumbling blocks with the wicked;  
And I will cut off man from off the land,"  
Saith the Lord.*

I will tell you how it was (my father said), that we were spared.

In that now long-gone day, I was a scientist. With a handful of my fellows I worked in these caverns carefully concealed beneath the surface of the earth. Ours was a very furtive enterprise—"top secret" was the phrase used in those days to describe the nature of our work. You have seen the machines, you know that which we studied. The atom, and its fearsome potentialities.

There were eight of us here on the day of death. Six were men, two women. I was the youngest; the others have long since gone. Our laboratories were well equipped, stocked with food supplies for indeterminately great lengths of time, carefully calculated to be self-sustaining in such stores as water and the precious air of life. Because we worked so far beneath the surface,

our air supply was artificial. Further, we had a series of buffering locks preventing leakage to the corridors.

It was this safety measure that spared us. To our great depth and isolation, to those shielding chambers of steel, we are indebted for our lives. For when the fire came, and after it the great emptiness, our caverns shook and trembled—but endured.

We know what happened; we do not know how. It is not enough merely to say it was the hydrogen bomb. That is a specious explanation, and one which is, at best, guesswork. For all we know, the spark may have been created by the fission of some entirely different element. We have no way of knowing, now, with what forces our enemy experimented.

All we do know is that someone blundered. Someone failed to take into account the fact that earth's atmosphere, the breath of life itself, was to one-fifth comprised of oxygen, the greatest supporter of combustion known.

When that first spark unleashed its chain reaction—well, we do not know. But in the space of seconds, every thing that crept or walked or flew on the Outside was ended. The conquered and the conquerors alike, the dreamers and the clods too dull to dream, were motes in one brief flame that filled the sky. An instant, until earth's envelope of atmosphere was gone. Then the bleak cold of interstellar space moved in to claim the globe which it had spawned.

The rest I need not tell. You have the records. In them we have set forth the history of our subterranean life. You know how through the creeping years we lived, how we grew produce hydroponically to sustain life, how we continued our research, striving ever to find a way of restoring to earth its envelope of air, how here below the surface you came into being—pathetic offspring of a dwindling few who dared not think of



earth without some hope, without some semblance of its former self, to carry on the work we had begun.

All this was years ago. Now I am old. The others, one by one, have gone to rest. All, all, are gone, and I am left alone, last of the elders, last of those futile few who walked unscathed from that celestial pyre. Soon I must go. Like them, I would be borne to the Outside, there at the end to have my ashes mingle with the dust of that mankind of which I was a part.

But when I go, you must not grieve my loss. Particularly, you must not give up hope. It will not last forever, our imprisonment. Now we are forced to dwell beneath the earth, a helpless race of new-world troglodytes. Here we must live because we have no choice. But in the great, wise fullness of God's time, you will go forth again one day. One day again there will be green on earth. One day again, grant God, there will be life. This is the land—and you are its inheritors.

*I will praise Thee, for I am fearfully and  
wonderfully made!  
Marvellous are Thy works,  
And that my soul knoweth right well.  
My substance was not hid from Thee  
When I was made in secret  
And curiously wrought in the lowest parts  
of the earth.*

I closed the book, my brothers raised their heads.

"It is finished?" asked the youngest. I nodded. We left the mound. In the skies where the sun was not, against the jet of space the stars burned with a tiny, diamond pain. Slowly we left the Outside, passed through the empty caverns and the sighing locks, down the long ramps and tortuous inclines to the snug haven in the bowels of earth which is our lonely empire.

There I dispatched the others to their tasks. Our father said the efforts must go on. I am the eldest, it devolves on me henceforth to make the plans—and the decisions.

Some little while I sat in brooding thought. Then I arose and made my daily rounds. I saw once more the vats and crucibles, the laboratories where my brothers work. To the broadcasting room I went at last. This was a routine that must not be ignored. "Elsewhere on earth," my father oft had said, "there may be other caves. Within them other men may live and, like ourselves, strain to make contact with their own lost kind."

I pulsed a signal to the silent world. The world, as always, gave back no reply.

So, at the last, I came back to this room. It was my father's room; here are the books in which he read, the books in which he wrote. Here in thin lines upon time-faded sheets he has inscribed the swan song of mankind. And here today I have appended this—my tribute to his memory.

*But those that wait upon the Lord, they  
shall inherit the earth.*

So it is written; so the father told. But—is it worth it? Is it worth our while to seek and strive to gain new foothold on an earth sheared bare of loveliness and warmth? What if one day the earth again be green? Will it be home to us who were not born of it? What though we people earth once more, rebuild its cities, pick up again the thwarted dreams of man, and carry his ambitions to the stars? Will it have any meaning to us, any joy?

I think not. And I think my father erred in bidding we must carry on his work. Now he is gone; life

holds for us no purpose. We who inherit hold as valueless the bequest that our dying father left.

Therefore, some moments hence I touched the switch: the master switch that governs the controls that feed my robot brothers with false life. Now they stand silent at their silent posts, motionless tributes to man's last, great effort to perpetuate his kind. A race of metal images of men. It is too bad there were no children born of those sterile eight who outlived earth's last day.

Now, in a moment, I shall touch the switch upon my breast; the switch that gives me life. Then I, too, shall be silent with the rest.

*I wonder what it feels like to be dead?*

## THE WORLD OF WILLIAM GRESHAM

Let me begin with an apology. Since I am a medical doctor, and my previous literary efforts have been limited to recountals of case histories couched in the technical language of my profession, this will be no smooth and polished narrative.

However, that matters little. Save for occasional paragraphs in which I have attempted to describe and interpret the progressive decline of my patient, the bulk of that which you are about to read is not my own writing, but is composed of excerpts from the diary of the late William Gresham.

Dr. Gresham (whose degree was not in medicine, but in the field of advanced physics) was admitted to St. Barnaby's on the tenth day of April last. His attitude toward his commitment was unlike that of the average patient. He neither protested his hospitalization nor did he—as do many—appear to welcome the quiet sanctuary of a therapeutic refuge. From the start of his confinement to the day of its inexplicable ending his conduct can best be described by the statement that he did not seem to care. He simply did not seem to care.

By this I do not mean to imply that Gresham was in a state of such mental confusion that he did not know where he was or what he was doing. To the end, he was completely aware of his surroundings. He always maintained a pleasant and coöperative relationship with the members of our hospital staff. He answered all questions frankly, affably, clearly, and with frequent evidence of that keen wit for which he was noted during his teaching career. He took in his stride such tests as were given

him, achieving scores which, as a psychologist, I am reluctantly compelled to consider inconclusive in his case, since without exception they indicated him to be well above the norm in perception and lucidity, and—where intellectual capacity was concerned—with equal invariability rated him in the genius class.

Still, as will shortly become apparent to readers of this history, there was some curious twist in the mind of William Gresham: an aberrating factor not detectable by any testing methods presently known to psychiatry. Either that or—

But I will not hypothesize. I greatly prefer to let Gresham's diary tell its own amazing story. So, without further comment, I offer the first significant selection, an entry written several weeks before Dr. William Gresham entered St. Barnaby's Mental Hospital for observation and subsequent commitment.

March 3rd

It has come at last: the war we loathed and dreaded but more than half expected, the all-out conflict which for so long a time we have so futilely striven to avoid.

A few minutes ago all network programs were interrupted in order that over the nation's combined radio facilities might simultaneously be brought to the American people a message of great importance. Moments later, listeners heard and television viewers saw the President of the United States speaking from a studio somewhere in the nation's capital.

He wasted no time in coming to the point. Quietly, gravely, in a voice weighted with the heavy responsibility now come to rest upon his already overburdened shoulders, he delivered his fateful message.

"My friends and fellow countrymen: As your President, it is my sad duty to inform you that our nation is involved in a state of active war.

"A little less than one hour ago armed forces of the



Soviet powers, without prior declaration or warning, committed a coördinated series of unprovoked naval and aerial attacks upon United Nations military installations in Japan, Formosa, and the Philippine Islands. The results of these have been launched.

"As Commander-in-Chief of our armed forces, I have instructed our military leaders in the combat zone to strike back at our aggressors immediately with every means at their disposal—including our heaviest and most lethal weapons of latest design.

"I call upon all Americans for their utmost support in this emergency. We did not want this war, but now that we are in it we will meet the enemy's challenge with strength, with courage, and with fortitude. The rights of free men everywhere must be preserved, and with God's help we will emerge victorious from this conflict."

So spoke the President. There has not yet come any further battle news, or enlightenment as to what he meant when he spoke of "our heaviest and most lethal weapons of latest design." But I think I know; I fear I know only too well. And because I have more reason than most men to realize the dreadful potentialities of the weapons he referred to, today I am steeped in dark despair. What lies ahead of us I dare not consider. Like everyone else I can only hope for the best. But I await future developments with foreboding.

War has begun. The President's message marks the end of the beginning. Or is it the beginning of the end?

March 4th

This morning the seismograph shook; shook with unprecedented violence. So sudden and so rude were the tremors recorded that at our observatory the pen was forcibly driven from the drum. Thus, for the present at least, we cannot determine the shock area with any degree of accuracy. We must wait for correlating reports from other stations.

This could mean that in some distant corner of the globe a giant meteor—one greater than that which centuries ago created Arizona's famed crater—has crashed to earth in a blaze of fury. It could mean, otherwise, that somewhere a slumbering volcano has exploded, destroying thousands in its fiery blast, perhaps deluging entire cities beneath rivers of searing lava.

I only hope it is so minor a disaster. . . .

March 5th

Harbin!

Harbin, rail center of Soviet Manchuria, is the site of the instrument-recorded shock. But the earthquake was not natural; it was man-made. The War Department has just issued a communique which says in part:

"SHUNA reports the total destruction of the troop-dispersement center and supply-depot city of Harbin as a result of yesterday's air raid. A single bomb of improved nuclear fission type was employed. Complete elimination of the target is claimed."

A single bomb! Supreme Headquarters of the United Nations forces in Asia does not say *what* element was cleft to create so mighty an explosion. But I know. It could not have been uranium or plutonium. It must have been the recently perfected hydrogen bomb. Only *it* could have erased so great a city in so short a time; only *it* could have caused the seismograph pens to dance as they did.

The dance of death. Will any of us escape its fatal music?

March 6th

Silence out of Harbin. Elsewhere the Soviet press and radio scream outraged accusations and threats of reprisal. But no word issues from the stricken city itself.

March 7th

No word out of Harbin. Four of our reconnaissance planes were shot down as they attempted to cross the Manchurian border. We have been unable to approach the bombed city to obtain photographic evidence of the damage done there. So we are forced to depend on enemy communiques for information, and save for vituperative streams of abuse, the Soviet radio is curiously reserved. The Vladivostok station, previously a noisy, 'round-the-clock disseminator of Communist propaganda, abruptly and inexplicably went off the air early this morning, though oddly enough no raids were reported in the area.

March 8th

SHUNA Intelligence estimates the Harbin population at the time of atom bombing to have been between 1,000,000 and 1,500,000, claiming the normal civilian population of 500,000 to have been augmented at that time by at least twice that many troops in transit.

The Soviet powers neither deny this nor confirm it. There is still no word out of Harbin. Nor, disturbingly, out of the surrounding area. Our ground forces in Korea report unusual troop movements in the northern part of the peninsula. Great numbers of the enemy are pouring southward. But not in military formation. They seem to be advancing in mass without either arms or supplies.

March 9th

The war has taken a mad, unpredictable turn. Today Soviet planes struck again at Japan and the Philippines, and naval units bombarded Formosa with unrelenting vigor. But at the 38th parallel in Korea, where the enemy is known to have maintained his greatest single concentration of ground forces, our army has won a tremendous victory without firing a shot!

All day long, vast hordes of Communists have been streaming across the border in a wild, disorganized rout. The foot soldiers followed as best they could. Panic was the keynote of their flight. They approached our bastions unarmed, having left their heavy equipment and weapons on the road behind them that they might travel the faster. Their only display of opposition was when our men tried to herd them into concentration camps. Even then, they did not *fight*. Rather, they stampeded—indifferent to bullets and barbed-wire alike—and continued their southward movement.

Prisoners are being held for interrogation, and before long we may learn the reason behind this puzzling mass flight. So far, no word has been received from SHUNA. There is a growing suspicion in my mind. I wonder if—

But that's impossible!

Or—is it?

March 10th

SHUNA has lowered a curtain of rigid censorship over the Korea sector. We are not told why. But I am beginning to fear my supposition is correct. Now if United Nations troops are ordered to evacuate the peninsula . . .

March 11th

Washington has just announced that our armed forces are withdrawing from Korea. Then I was right. It is a chain. But in what measure? To what degree? If mild, there may yet be some hope. But if extreme—God help us all!

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The preceding excerpts cover a period of slightly more than a week. Gresham's entries, if somewhat emotional, are concise, lucid, almost documentary. Only—

Well, already the reader will have recognized that this diary records events of a history that never transpired. Gresham's week is from a calendar that never was.

The diary—into which we now dip at intervals for additional notations—becomes increasingly fantastic as the days pass by. Apparently Gresham's imaginative powers rise to dizzier heights as his aberration deepens.

March 18th

No armistice, as such, has been officially declared, but fighting in all sectors has come to an end. Today elements of the Soviet navy combined with those of the United Nations fleet to effect the evacuation of Hokkaido without a single incident of belligerent nature being reported.

There is further information from Moscow. Russian physicists estimate the expansion rate to be approximately 50 miles per day. This is very close to the figure I computed on the basis of press reports of the past week.

Fifty miles per day! That is 350 a week, 1500 per month. At that rate—

March 24th

All of Japan is gone, and the China mainland south as far as Shanghai. A few refugees have straggled in from vanished Peiping. Their reports are identical with those we received earlier: first the heat, then the liquefaction, and finally the dissolution.

Our reconnaissance planes offer no encouragement. Sea water does not slow the scourge as we had vainly hoped. The Yellow Sea is gone; so is the Sea of Japan. The dwindling tides of the East China Sea bubble and seethe with boiling heat; scalding tides sweep the coasts, and the air is nauseous with the stench of dead marine animals.

April 3rd

The scourge has devoured Formosa, and our garrison on Luzon is fleeing to Australia. China is swallowed as far west as Chungking. Russia reports the crescent has



extended to Kolymsk in the north and Kamchatka in the east. Famine and disease are taking an increasing toll of lives in Asia. More than forty million refugees have crammed their way into Indo-China, and are ravaging the land like locusts.

April 9th

The Kimmerling Experiment has failed. I feared it would. You can combat fire with fire, but that which we are fighting is more than fire; it is the very living essence of destruction. Kimmerling's idea of encircling the omnivorous circle with a neutralized zone might possibly have worked a month ago, but it is too late now. Our last remaining hope is that the scourge may eat itself out of existence. But that is an unreasonable hope, contrary to the basic laws of physics.

Strange is public reaction to this crisis. People look at me oddly when I tell them mankind is doomed. Why, I do not know. I think they must be half crazed with fear. Indeed, many to whom I speak act as if they don't even *know* what is happening, and—worse yet—what *will* happen.

My own family has succumbed to this universal mania, this living lie, this ostrich policy of pretending that by refusing to face the facts they may avert the consequences. They assure me I am mistaken, that there is nothing to fear. They advise me to consult a doctor; they insist that I go to a psychiatric clinic for observation.

Well, why not? There is no reason to quarrel. With months, perhaps only weeks, remaining to us, one place is as good as another. There is no hiding place from final judgment. If it gives them consolation to delude themselves with the notion that *I* am mentally unstable . . .

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On April 10th, Dr. William Gresham was committed

to the care of St. Barnaby's Hospital by his family. Thus he became one of my charges.

He was, as I have said, a model patient. Paranoid schizophrenics are rarely troublesome. They are not prone to sudden homicidal furies, as are manic-depressives. Save when their pet obsessions are challenged, they appear to be quite lucid and rational.

So with Gresham. His conversation varied from normalcy only when he discussed world events. My case-book records the following typical conversation between him and myself on April 29th. Apologetically I mention here—having not previously done so—that I am Dr. Thomas Preston, psychiatrist.

*Preston:* Good morning, Dr. Gresham. How are you feeling today?

*Gresham:* Fine, thank you.

*Preston:* Enjoy your breakfast?

*Gresham:* Very much.

*Preston:* I trust you slept well last night?

*Gresham:* (Wryly) As well as can be expected—under the circumstances.

*Preston:* Circumstances?

*Gresham:* Oh, Lord! Not you, too?

*Preston:* I'm afraid I don't understand.

*Gresham:* My dear boy, don't you see it's no use? You can't escape the truth by closing your eyes to it.

*Preston:* Which truth are you referring to, Doctor?

*Gresham:* (Impatiently) The only truth that matters any more. The fact that we are doomed. Surely you heard the radio last night?

(*Note:* Radio programs of the preceding evening were those regularly scheduled by the networks. There was no such special broadcast as that described by the patient.)

*Preston:* Why, yes. As a matter of fact, I did.

*Gresham:* The special broadcast from Sitka?

*Preston:* Sitka, Alaska? On which network?

*Gresham:* Which network? All the networks! Didn't you hear what they said? Nome—gone! The Aleutians—gone! The Bering Sea swallowed in that damned, insatiable maw. And you refuse to acknowledge anything has happened!

*Preston:* Just what did you hear on the radio last night, Dr. Gresham? Apparently I missed the broadcast you're referring to.

*Gresham:* (Wearily) What does it matter? Listen tonight and you'll hear more of the same thing. Day by day it comes closer at that constant, creeping rate; unvarying, inexorable. Fifty miles a day. Its radius is 2700 miles now. In another month it will reach California. In one more—

*Preston:* What comes closer, doctor? I don't—

*Gresham:* (Petulantly) Death, you young imbecile! What's the matter with all you people, anyway? Have you gone completely mad? Or are you just too cowardly to face facts? To confront the horror that lies before us?

*Preston:* Now, Dr. Gresham—please don't get excited. I'll give you a sedative—

*Gresham:* Let me alone, confound you! I don't need a sedative. All I want is peace—quiet—forgetfulness.

*Preston:* Of course. I'll leave now, if you wish. I'm sorry I upset you.

*Gresham:* No, don't go. I'm the one who should apologize. I didn't mean to be rude, Doctor. But I am upset. It's my fault, you know. Or partly, that is. We started all this. My colleagues and I.

*Preston:* Oh?

*Gresham:* Yes. We should have refused. We knew it was dangerous. But we thought we were being good patriots—

*Preston:* When you did *what*, Doctor?

*Gresham:* Our research. The Manhattan Project, and the later, more advanced, studies. We provided the

scientific knowledge with which they created Juggernaut. But we didn't know what we were doing, Preston. We guessed there was danger; yes. But this is much worse than anything we expected. We feared a sudden flame, a swift and devastating reaction of the gaseous elements, in which earth might be consumed in an instant of blazing fury. We strove to avoid that—and succeeded. But *this*—

*Preston:* You're talking, now, about your work for the government on nuclear fission weapons?

*Gresham:* (Nods) Yes—God help me! But we didn't expect this. We never dreamed the chain reaction would spread like a cancerous blight from molecule to molecule, from atom to atom, in a widening circle, devouring everything it touched: the land, the sea, the world, and all mankind.

*Preston:* Then *that* is what you think is happening?

*Gresham:* Think? That's what I *know* is happening! Why do you all conspire to pretend there is nothing wrong?

*Preston:* Dr. Gresham—suppose I were to tell you there is nothing wrong? That all your fears are but figments of your imagination?

*Gresham:* (Slowly) Then I would say that everyone on earth but me has gone stark, staring mad with panic fear. Can I not trust the witness of my own eyes and ears?

*Preston:* Not always, Doctor. Hallucination can be very real. Sometimes—

*Gresham:* Hallucin— Oh, get out!

*Preston:* But Dr. Gresham—

*Gresham:* Get out!

(*Note:* At this point I withdrew, rather than cause the patient any additional disturbance.)

Now you begin to understand the curious delusion of Dr. William Gresham. The preceding conversation

was of great assistance to us in diagnosing his mental ailment; it was less helpful in suggesting a treatment. Since his family would not permit E.S.T. or insulin shock, the case progressively drifted toward deeper disassociation with reality. As witness the following diary excerpts:

May 5th

Today is a grisly anniversary of sorts. Two short months ago a single hydrogen bomb—the combined World Government news bureau has long since admitted it was that—dropped on the city of Harbin. Since that fateful day one sixth of earth's land area has been eaten away into frightful nothingness by the chain reaction that one bomb unleashed.

Where China used to be is now a pulsating blot of all-devouring radiation, a festering sore upon the corpse of earth. Thailand is gone, and most of what was proud Russia. Kure and Midway Islands went last night. Far to the north the plague has touched the Pole.

There is no longer any way of estimating the dead. Some say 300,000,000; others place the figure twice that high. Europe is overrun with frenzied refugees clawing their way into cities that do not want and cannot feed them, wild-eyed and desperate humans vainly struggling to escape certain death for another month, another week, a day, an hour.

Madness! There is no escape. There is only delay. Man has built mankind's pyre with his learning. . . .

June 2nd

Northern Australia. Saudi Arabia. Berlin, Germany. And Vancouver Island on our own continent.

June 12th

One hundred days. London died stubbornly; Paris with Gallic grace. The states of Washington and Oregon



have slipped into the abyss. San Francisco must fall tomorrow or the next day.

There is indescribable confusion everywhere. Some men have turned to God in their extremity, others have chosen to go down rioting in the madness of a last frenetic orgy. Which way is better is not mine to say. Perhaps it does not really matter?

But as the end approaches all men have turned violently against those whose leadership brought Armageddon upon them. Here and abroad—what remains of abroad!—political leaders and military chieftains live, if at all, in peril of their lives. A stricken people, now convinced of their impending doom, seem bitterly determined to wreak final vengeance on those who wrought their destruction.

Dog eat dog. But to what purpose? The days remaining are too few to be important.

June 15th

It is selfish, I suppose, to think only of my own land and people in this world-wide cataclysm. But, after all, I am an American. The death of thousands here means more to me than that of millions elsewhere. Besides, the channels of communication with the rest of the yet unravaged world have been well nigh destroyed. Only South America and the southern tip of Africa remain untouched by the scourge.

Here in America the encroaching arc creeps steadily eastward. The names of the fallen cities are like a toll for their dead. Butte, Boise, Reno, Fresno. . . .

June 17th

Again I have computed the time remaining to us. It is always the same. Seven hundred and fifty miles—fifteen days. Two weeks! Grim answer to a once popular parlor game query: What would you do if you knew you had but two weeks to live?

I know, now, what I would do. *Will* do. I will go on as ever, eating and drinking, sleeping, reading, talking, striving to ignore the end until it comes.

I am glad I came to St. Barnaby's. Somehow this refuge has escaped the madness that has gripped the world outside. Here, somehow, they maintain the blissful pretense that beyond these four walls nothing is happening. If any of them are frightened, they conceal it well.

But, wait! Perhaps the same wardens have long since fled, and all my companions here—even those pretending to be doctors—are really fellow inmates? It is a reasonable answer to an otherwise inexplicable situation.

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The reader must understand that these pages from Dr. Gresham's diary did not become available to our inspection until after his demise. Thus, at the time of their writing, we had no way of knowing his obsession was coming so close to its conclusion, else we might have tried to do something to ease his mind of its harassing fears. Though *what*, I do not know.

My final conversation with Dr. Gresham was held on the first day of June. My visit to his room was routine. I spent more time with him than usual because of his unusual nervousness. This I tried to assuage—not too successfully, I fear.

"You seem rather fretful today, Dr. Gresham," I said. "Quite unlike yourself."

"That surprises you?" he asked somewhat acidly.

"In your case, yes. Is there anything I can get for you to make you more at ease? A book, perhaps?"

He stared at me with a curious expression, strangely combining admiration and wonder.

"You *are* a cool one, Preston," he declared. "I'm sure I don't understand you at all. But I admire you. Envy you, too. You're really *not* frightened?"

"Frightened?"

"At what is going to happen tonight?"

I said, "Perhaps if you would explain—"

"Why? You know as much as I do; maybe more. Tell me—what of the city outside? Is there rioting here, as elsewhere?"

"Everything is normal outside," I assured him. "It is a beautiful day. A trifle warm, perhaps—"

"Warm?" His eyes narrowed. "How warm? Perhaps it is coming sooner than I estimated."

"Summer, you mean? Dr. Gresham, tell me something. Frankly, please. Have you lost track of time since you came here? Do you remember the day, the month, the year?"

"Of course, Preston. I keep a diary."

"Then tell me," I persisted. "What day is it? What year?"

I had some hope of getting a response that would aid me in solving his case. Schizophrenics are frequently "off their time track," so to speak. That is to say their minds are ensnared in a period of time remote from that which their physical bodies inhabit.

But I got no satisfaction and no clue. My patient frowned at me impatiently.

"Don't be absurd, Doctor. Time is not important. Time is the measure of duration. Physical things are touched by duration; the mind is not. If it is of any interest to you, please accept my assurance that I *do* know these facts quite well. *Too* well. I know we have less than twenty hours left, and that these hours are slipping away, minute by speeding minute."

I shrugged and prepared to leave. As I reached the doorway I paused and snapped on the small radio his family had installed in the room for Gresham's entertainment. The sound of laughter issued from the speaker. I recognized the show as one of those audience participation breakfast clubs.

I said, "Would you like to hear this, Doctor? It's rather amusing sometimes."

He turned blank eyes upon me. "Eh? Hear what?" "This show from Chicago."

"Chicago!" He looked at me pityingly. "There is no Chicago any more. Chicago went off the air yesterday. I heard the last broadcast. Poor devils!"

"But this *is* Chicago, Dr. Gresham. The program you hear now. This music, this laughter—"

He stared at me, at the radio, then at me again.

"You mean," he said gently, "You actually think you hear music and laughter from that silent box?"

"But of course! Don't you?"

"Then my guess was right," he whispered. "You *are* one of them."

Then he laughed. It was not good laughter. It had in it the biting edge of hysteria.

"This is the cream," he cried. "The very cream of the jest. But never mind, *Doctor*—" he stressed the title sardonically—"play your role while you can. Snatch what pleasure you can from mankind's waning hours. Sanity and insanity—they are all one now."

I thought it best to withdraw. I said, "Well, I'll be going now, Dr. Gresham. But I'll see you again tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? You think so?"

"Of course. I'll be in to see you in the morning."

"But—" He seemed about to say something. Then he changed his mind, clamping his lips tightly. After a moment he spoke softly, almost kindly. "Yes, my boy. As you wish. Good-by."

"Good day, Dr. Gresham."

"No," he said. "Not good day. Good-by."

He spoke with an incomprehensible finality. At the time, I didn't understand. I left, baffled. Understanding did not come to me until the morning of the following day. I realized, then, that Dr. Gresham had not spoken

meaninglessly. He had been bidding me a last farewell.  
...

On the night of July 1st there was a brief and unprecedented disturbance in that wing of the hospital on which Dr. Gresham's room was located. The attendant on duty made a check of the corridor but found nothing amiss. The outcries ceased shortly after they began, and it could not be determined from which room they had originated.

So it is only *assumption* on my part that these cries were the last vocal utterances of Dr. William Gresham. But I feel it is a reasonable assumption. In consideration of what we found the next morning—and of the final diary entry—

July 1st

I am sorry, now, my window faces west. It might be better if I could not *see* it coming. But see it I do. It is midnight, or almost, but the sky is a sullen red; by the ugly glow of the blight I can see the city's skyline as at dusk.

Weird sight; terrifying, yet fascinating. A *melting* skyline. One moment a skyscraper points its concrete finger to the heavens, a seeming staunch, eternal symbol of mankind's mastery over the elements. The next, it wavers and trembles, sheathed in an outré luminescence. Then it is gone—additional fodder to the boundless appetite of element-hungry atoms.

I have an hour, perhaps, or half that long. Why I continue to write, I cannot say, for these poor, foolish lines I scrawl on paper will soon be one with myself in the churning maelstrom of destruction.

Strangely enough, I am not— Ah! Great clouds of steam! That would be the Hudson? Then there is less time than I thought . . .



Later

Here is a curious thing: the radio is still on! I am amazed to find that some men are so brave, but I am also proud. The announcer has just said that the broadcast will continue "as long as possible"—I know what he means, as do his handful of listeners. I suppose there is a consolation of sorts in it for him. Since he must go anyway, it is some sort of honor to report the death of man's greatest city.

Those who could buy or fight their way elsewhere are gone. It appears that Argentina may be the last place to go. So those who could do so have fled there. Vainly, of course. They have won, at most, another month of respite.

Later

One thing continues to puzzle me. Since the plague eats in a great surface circle, why does it not also devour inward, boring a concave tunnel to the bowels of the earth?

This *should* be so, but obviously is not. Else long ago the central magma would have been tapped, splitting Earth into fragments with its fiery convulsions, flooding the surface with billions of tons of molten death.

Why did I overlook this fact before? Have I been a fool? Perhaps there is a faint hope for the salvation of mankind in caverns deep beneath the face of earth. I hope some savant wiser than myself has thought of this, has taken refuge in such a place.

Later

It has reached Central Park. In minutes, now, the stone ramparts of Rockefeller Center will slip away—

Yes, there they go! And the radio goes with them.

Later

It is growing uncomfortably hot. The glow is dull no

longer, but bright, bright, bright. There is an incessant sound in the air. I cannot describe it. It is a sort of humming, or buzzing—electrical? The sound of death—

Later

Two rows of buildings before me. Two rows, no more. The heat becomes unbearable. I have taken off my clothes. I cannot look out the window for more than seconds at a time. The dancing radiation sears my eyes.

The row of buildings closest has begun to shimmer.

A man just darted past my window. He was running *toward* the flame, not from it. The best way—

That was what? A shock? A tremor of *this* building?

I must get out of here! I was wrong. The moments *are* worth fighting for. Another day of life—even another hour—

They do not answer my cries. They have all fled. I am alone—alone with the heat and the brilliance—

Now the lip of the crescent creeps across the lawn outside. For the first time I can see the seething lake behind the rim. Like nibbling lips the rim devours all before it.

What can contain the universal solvent?

Heat worse. Lawn gone. Walls shimmering—

The thrumming tumult grows.  
Physics? Energy?  
Energy—or God?

Thou shalt not kill—

The walls are gone. I can move forward, end it. But seize the minutes. Seconds—

Floor glows. Sweat. Pain. Terror.

Pray for us now and in the hour of—

Nucl—

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Thus ends the diary of Dr. William Gresham. He who can solve it is a greater psychiatrist than I, than any of our hospital staff. We could explain everything on the grounds of progressive dementia—were it not for one fact.

The fact that the unclad remains of Dr. Gresham were found on the chair before his typewriter desk—charred to a handful of ash!

Only he was so touched. There had been no fire in his room. The furniture, the rugs and draperies, the clothes he had discarded, were unscorched. But the body of the late physicist had been reduced, as by transcendent heat, to the ashes of the elements composing it.

We have sought everywhere—and vainly—for clues to explain this phenomenon. One of our most brilliant staff men came up with what is perhaps the *best* explanation—and it is based rather on fantasy than reason.

"Obsession," he offered, "to its ultimate degree. Complete acceptance of a total sensory hallucination."

"But his body," I demurred. "It was utterly consumed! By what? By an imaginary flame?"

"Why not? Have you never heard, Preston, of stigmata?"

One of Gresham's associates in the physics department of his university presented another thought.

"I don't know that this will help you," he told us, "but I offer it for what it may be worth. Gresham was deeply interested in time-travel. Not necessarily of a physical nature, but of the mind. He believed that the human mind transcends the normal boundaries of space and time—an idea presented by Dr. Rhine, of Duke

University, you may remember—and Gresham spent much time experimenting along these lines.

“What success he had, I do not know. But in view of the strange circumstances—”

So we are back where we started, utterly unable to offer any reasonable explanation for Dr. Gresham’s passing. Two theories are offered, both implausible.

Implausible. That only. Not impossible—though a week ago I would have used the stronger word. But there are many things I do not know, and many more I do not understand. As a scientist, it is my obligation to maintain a reasonable doubt; to withhold judgment till the facts are known.

Time-travel? Gresham dismissed with careless ease my question as to the *year*. But suppose his experiments *had* been successful, and that in some strange way he had succeeded in doing that which no man to our knowledge has ever done before—projecting a portion of himself forward into a time which is not yet, a time which is to come?

It would explain so many, many things. All but the final mystery: how his mind could dwell, see, and hear in one time, and his body exist in another time.

And—there is another fear that comes to me, the fear that makes me loath to accept this explanation.

If Gresham’s senses *were* in a future era—was what he saw and heard what *we* will one day know?

How *far* did his mind journey into the future? One hundred years? Or ten? Or—to next year?

*All patiently awaited the event  
Without a stir or sound . . .*

Thompson—The City of Dreadful Night

## THE SILENT PLANET

*From THE NEW YORK TIMES, 11 August 1963*  
LUNAR ROCKET LANDS!  
World Radio Audience Hears  
First Broadcast from Moon  
*Explorers Find No Life On Satellite*

*From TIME Magazine, 3 April 1967:*

Settled finally, conclusively, is the centuries-old dispute of astronomers. Answer: the planet Mars is a tenantless world. Survey parties of the first Martian expedition (TIME, Feb. 20), completing an exhaustive search of the ruddy globe, found no life-forms other than shrubs, lichens, mosses, eking out a scant existence in the sheer-walled chasms of the continental clefts once commonly (erroneously) called "canals."

Sighed Marscientist Rodney Travers ("Baldy") Hurst, domepated Director of U.N. Interplanetary Research Commission, "It is now certain that intelligent life as we know it is not, nor ever has been, native to our sister planet. Neither signs of present inhabitants nor artifacts of ancient civilizations have been found by our field men."

Public reaction varied. Romantics mourned vanished dreams of pulchritudinous princesses; realists hailed release from dread of Wellsian monsters.



*Title of READER'S DIGEST article, October 1971:*  
INTELLIGENCE: GOD'S UNIQUE GIFT TO MAN?

*From the Official Report of the Venus Expedition, 1973-4:*

A comprehensive survey covering all oceans, the four major land masses, and numerous islands, disclosed no sign of any intelligent life-form. Zoologic samples collected include many grades and phyla previously known to man, and some which will require new classification, but in no instance—

*Billboard of the First United Church of Kennewahoochie, Maine, Sunday, 6 February 1977:*

*Tonight!*

Special Musical Sermon  
WHO CREATES LIFE AND WISDOM?

Rev. Filbert Hotchkisson  
(Assisted by the Young Ladies' Choir)

*Portion of flight orders from the United World Council to the Commander of the Spaceship Prometheus, June 1981:*

—to the planetary system, if any, of the sun-star *Proxima Centauri*, there at your discretion and in such manner as may be dictated by prevailing circumstances, to search for, and upon finding, to establish contact with, any intelligent life-born inhabiting such planets—

*From the PHILADELPHIA BULLETIN, 10 June 1981:*  
PROMETHEUS TAKES OFF!

First Interstellar Spaceship  
Seeks Life Beyond Solar System  
Twenty-Year Flight Confronts Voyagers

*From an editorial in THREE WORLDS Magazine, 13 June 2001:*

—And so, at last, man stands upon the threshold of

fulfilling an age-old dream—the conquest of the stars. Two exciting decades have passed since the *Prometheus* disappeared into the black vault of space, headed toward *Proxima Centauri*, our sun's nearest stellar neighbor, some four light-years, or twenty-five million million miles, distant.

Since then Luna has become a thriving and populous outpost, as have our two closest sister planets. Expeditions have been dispatched to farther siblings of Sol's family, and within a short time these—or at least their moons—also may harbor colonists from earth. We have proven our ability to expand, to reproduce our culture wherever human life can be sustained.

But this is not enough. Something within man cries for reassurance that he is not a mere fortuitous combining of the elements resulting in random life, that he does not stand alone, companionless, in all creation. It is hard to conceive Earth as the only mote in space which has spawned rational beings. Yet this may be true. So far we have found no evidence to indicate that elsewhere exist creatures, who like ourselves, live by laws of logic rather than sheer animal instinct. This is the greatest disappointment of our era.

The *Prometheus* adventurers will have strange tales to tell when they return to Earth. At this very moment they may be encountering marvels beyond our wildest concepts. But it is our earnest hope that on some distant planet circling a stranger sun they will find intelligent life, however differently from humankind it may be housed in form.

If they do not, then still we stand alone, masters of meaninglessness, sole rulers of a hollow and empty void. Tomorrow may bring companionship, but today—it is a lonely thing to be a man. . . .

*From the diary of Tim Egan, communications expert of the First Interstellar Expedition. Undated:*

Another complete failure. A short time ago we lifted plates from the fourth and last major satellite of this fantastic star-system's largest planet, departed without having found one sign, symbol, or token of life.

I am discouraged. I cannot speak for the others, but I am beginning to fear the religious fanatics were right when they claimed we *are* a unique and favored creation of divinity. If intelligence is a universal trait—or even an evolutionary end-product universally accessible—it is strange that we encountered it nowhere amongst the planets of our own sun. And it is even more strange that after hurtling our way across incredible spans of space we have found it nowhere in this, our neighbor star-system.

Matt Goran, our astronomical expert, offers that we have not yet explored the most *likely* planets of this group.

"This is a dwarf sun," he explained to me. "An old sun. Its sallow color proves its age. It has condensed and collapsed within itself. Consequently, it emits only a tiny portion of the heat radiated by younger suns, such as our own. It is to be expected, therefore, that life as we know it would exist only on the innermost planets. That's where we're going next. If we find nothing there—" He shook his head doubtfully.

So we are soaring starward in this system; to what, I do not know. Another failure? Or at long last the hoped-for meeting with alien minds?

*From the diary of Tim Egan. Undated:*

We are approaching one of the inner planets, but it does not look promising to me. The fool thing is nothing but an oversized bubble, a deceptively puffed-up balloon. From a distance we thought it a fair-sized world, but as we reached telescopic range we discovered its high albedo and apparent size to be simply the effect of its composition. The planet is surrounded by, enswathed

in, a thick blanket of swirling, noxious gasses. Spectroscopic analysis shows these gasses to be lethal; we will have to wear spacesuits to land. Should life exist on this frigid little ball, I don't see how we can hope to establish contact with its possessors.

It is a proud thing, and exciting, to be a member of the first interstellar expedition—but it is a little frightening, too. The universe is so vast, so vast! Distance loses all meaning, and time becomes an academic term. On this ship we have long since ceased measuring duration in the terms we used at home. We eat when we are hungry, sleep when we are weary; we dare not face the horror of computing the interminable extent of our boredom.

How long since we lifted plates from our starting place? I do not know. How many times has our mother sun—a pale pinpoint from here—risen and set since we departed her warmth? How many times has our parent planet sailed its slow ellipse about that sun? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? I cannot guess. I do not want to know. I know only that long periods have passed, and that an equal number again may pass before we can go home.

Yet before we turn our ship homeward we must make every effort to find life, intelligent life. Our orders are explicit on that point. So let us hope it will be *this* time. Here. And now.

*From the Congressional Record, 15 July 2001:*

*Mr. Wainwright:* Mr. Speaker.

*Mr. Townsend:* The Chair recognizes the honorable member from Ohio.

*Mr. Wainwright:* In regard to the pending HS-36M42 bill, allotting seven billions of credit units to the outfitting of a second interstellar expedition, I should like to go on record as being wholly and unalterably opposed to such wanton squandering of national funds. On numerous oc-

casions I have pointed out the folly of dispatching to outer space a second exploration party when the first is yet to be heard from. My party and constituents—

*Mr. Fowler:* Mr. Speaker!

*Mr. Townsend:* Will the member from Ohio yield to the gentleman from Pennsylvania?

*Mr. Wainwright:* Granted.

*Mr. Fowler:* I should like to remind my esteemed colleague of a fact known to every intelligent kindergarten child in the world—that the *Prometheus* was not expected to arrive at the *Proxima Centauri* star-system until this or next year, and that even should it immediately find and establish contact with members of an alien culture we would not receive word of this for some time. Electronic communications being limited to the speed of light, or 186,000 miles per second, our earliest advice from the *Prometheus* cannot be expected for at least four years.

*Mr. Wainwright:* I assure the gentleman from Pennsylvania that I am quite familiar with these elementary facts. But may I suggest that the dispatching of a second expedition, when we already have one in the field, is absurdly parallel to the case of a baseball manager ordering a player to steal a base which is already occupied?

*Mr. Fowler:* Mr. Speaker, I am happy to learn that the honorable member from Ohio understands baseball strategy. Having suffered on several occasions the misfortune of watching the managerial tactics of the alleged ball club operating out of the representative's home town—

*Mr. Wainwright:* What? Now, see here, Fowler—

*Mr. Townsend:* Gentlemen! Please! (*Gavel*)

*From the diary of Tim Egan. Undated:*

We've found it! Life! Intelligent life! Impossible as it may sound, someone—or something—exists in the lethal atmosphere of this globe. We are preparing to drop

plates now, and from our vantage point above the soupy planet we can see cities, bridges, dams, every evidence of a highly organized, well developed, culture like our own!

There is tremendous excitement aboard ship. Space-suits have been issued to a landing party, of which I am to be a member. I must stop scribbling now and prepare for what may prove to be the greatest adventure of all time.

*From the log of the First Interstellar Expedition:*

15M305 Universal Constant Time: Lifted plates from Planet 3, Star-system GS. Mission unsuccessful; see official report. Fuel supply low. Returning to base.

*From the diary of Tim Egan. Undated:*

The poor devils! The poor, unfortunate devils! It frightens me to think of their dreadful doom, to realize that we could share that swift, mysterious fate. But even more it grieves me to know that we got here too late, too late!

As we dropped plates through the milky, gaseous sea surrounding our destination, the light from its exhausted sun dwindled, became progressively more feeble and wan, till when at last we landed on a barren beach not far from a population center, we were engulfed in a murky gloom.

Our first amazing discovery was that the ocean by which we had landed was *not* a liquid body, but a sea of frozen waves. Solid, unchanging, rocklike, it had congealed into an immobile mass. It was beautiful, in a wild, outré fashion, to see great billows towering in stilled spires of foam, their toppling crests arrested in the very act of breaking; to see the frothy fingers of frozen breakers clutching the beach in death's last cold embrace. Beautiful. But disturbing, too.

Beside me, Matt Goran muttered, "I don't like this.



Seas are the very essence of existence. If even the seas are cold, how can they live?"

"They *do* live," I said. "We saw towns."

"Towns, yes. But their inhabitants?"

The astronomer shook his head. Then the scoutship was trundled from the hold; we lifted for our journey to the nearby city.

I could go on here for pages describing that city: its wide, paved streets; its geometric squares of homes and buildings; its parks and highways, bridges, spans, and ells. I will not. I will only say that—with slight differences, of course—it was very much like our own cities. With very little change in habit and custom we could have lived in their metropolis, as they who built it could have lived in ours. So close, so very close, were we to finding friends.

But now we will not ever live in their cities—because those cities are lifeless. They will not ever come to dwell with us in ours—because their race is dead!

Now I have told it. Theirs is a silent planet, a ghost-world, cold and dead. Its masters are no more; their hopes and fears, their dreams and aspirations, triumphs and joys, all ended in a single instant's time when some catastrophe destroyed their world. The race is dead, its world a sepulchre.

I do not mean we found a world of abandoned cities. What we found was worse. We found a race that died upon its feet, halted by death in the very acts of life.

The streets were thronged with statues. And every one had been a living creature. Rigid images of beings much like ourselves—again save for slight differences, of course. The strange way their eyes were set in their heads . . . the odd number of digits on each hand . . . the awkward angulation of their leg and arm joints.

Their faces looked unusual to us, too, with their queer, inverted eyes and birdlike nostrils. But still they were good faces, intelligent, gentle, kind. We could have been

brothers to this race. Across the universe our hearts and hands might have met with theirs in warmth and fellowship—had they but lived.

"Death must have struck them suddenly," mused Matt Goran. "Suddenly and unexpectedly. How, we cannot guess. It may be that their star-system plunged abruptly into a sort of super cold spot in bleak space. The way in which all things are frozen, even their sparkling waterfalls and fountains, would seem to indicate this.

"Or perhaps that stifling miasma which envelops the planet is not their natural atmosphere but a noxious gas that smothered them to death. Plainly, this heavy mixture of elements is lethal. And, as you see, not one of the figures wears a protective mask. Nor is their any fear of death marked on their features. What happened, happened swiftly."

For we found no signs of panic in that city. The forms we saw were those of active beings, happy and relaxed. Laborers stood frozen at their work, clerks poised motionless pens over their open books. Here the small statue of a romping boy was captured in an eternal rhapsody of carefree play, there a young mother nursed her suckling child. A thousand variations on this theme. Yet all, all, were still. And over all brooded a silence worse than death itself.

I think this was the saddest thing of all. That on that whole great planet there was no sound of life.

They must have been a race of great refinement. In one great temple of culture were gathered stricken forms of those who sat in rapt, unending admiration of a work of art suspended on a wall before their eyes. Only the most aesthetically devout would gather so to worship things of beauty.

And yet they were no race of futile dreamers. Like us, they were a vigorous, athletic people. In a tremendous stadium we found vast numbers of them watching a game played by carven figures on a silent field. It

was a contest waged with a ball, like our own national pastime, and it gave me an eerie feeling to see those tense forms poised for instant action, now stilled forever by death's staying hand.

It was here we learned the impossibility of transporting home a statue-sample of the stricken race. We tried to do so at the commander's suggestion.

"We will take one of them back with us," he said. "At least we can show our people what they looked like."

So we landed in that muted playing field. Goran and I stepped from the scoutship, walking softly, slowly, respectfully, as one unconsciously does in the presence of death. We approached the nearest of the rigid figures, lifted and tried to carry it to the ship.

That is when we discovered the incalculable length of time which must have passed since death had touched their world. The destroying cataclysm apparently had happened much longer ago than we had first believed. For as we attempted to lift that seemingly solid form, it instantly dissolved beneath our grasp, crumbled to a fine, black powder, and vanished in charred wisps before our eyes.

Goran looked sorrowfully at the sprinkling of ash that a moment before had been a recognizable form.

"Ancient," he said. "Decayed by age, and rotted to the core. We can't touch them without their falling apart. Ashes and dust; dust and ashes."

It was impossible to gather any souvenirs, save for the photographs we took. Their books and clothing, furnishings and foodstuffs, however firm their surface appearance, alike dissolved and vanished at our touch. Even their metal tools and instruments were stricken with the malady of age; they twisted to unrecognizable shapes when moved. Nothing—no, wait! We *did* succeed in bringing back one memento of the silent world. A massive block of stone, carven in symbols of a tongue we do

not know. I fear those who sent us will find this one meagre museum piece poor recompense for the fabulous sums spent on outfitting our expedition. But at least it is tangible proof that elsewhere, once, another intelligent life-form did exist.

And so we have turned homeward, having accomplished what we were sent to do. We have found evidence that we did not always stand alone in an empty universe. One time there were others like ourselves.

But in the finding, we are losers still. Because we once had eagerness and hope. Now we feel even lonelier, more desolate, because at last we know that there were others—and they are gone. A haunting fear has come to dwell with us: will their fate, one sad day, be ours as well? In some unguessably remote future will our bright sun one day grow bleak and cold? Or will our loved home planet die, like theirs, in the flash of an instant, the flickering of an eye, with the breath half drawn, the smile half formed, the heart unbeating in a breast of stone?

*From the diary of Tim Egan. Undated:*

Goran has raised a most disturbing question. Last watch he came to me in my turret cabin. He was frowning.

"You're the communications expert, Egan," he said. "Perhaps you can help me. During the time we were on or near that last planet, did your instruments pick up anything unusual? Anything that might have reminded you of code signals?"

I glanced at him in surprise.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Then they *did*?"

"For a while," I nodded, "I did pick up something I can't explain. A series of regular, spaced pulsations in the short-wave band. I couldn't understand it, but since we don't use those bands—"

"The radiation spectrum of ether waves," he broke in, "is the span of possible frequencies—is that right?"

"Right. Audio waves are the longest, then we drop down to the heat range, then to the visibles. Below that—"

"Egan, I want you to do something strange. I want you to let your imagination run riot. Stop being a practical scientist and conceive a fantastic world."

Goran drew a deep, tremulous breath. "Suppose there were a race," he said, "with a perceptive range, a metabolic rate, a fraction of our own. A race of stepped-down creatures, you might say, who lived at so slow a pace that they could hear what we feel, feel what we see, and see—who knows what? Possibly the radiations we use for therapy.

"Such a race, to our eyes, would have no apparent motion. Their swiftest gesture would consume whole years of our time, their life-spans would be aeons to us. The beating of their hearts, their breathing, would be undetectable to all save our most delicate laboratory instruments.

"Egan—to us, the world of such a race would seem a world of statutes!"

I stared at him in something like dismay.

"You mean they—" I gasped. "You mean you think their world was not dead, after all? That they—"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. The idea came, and now I'm haunted by it. The evidence of your panels makes it stronger. Suppose those short waves your instruments picked up were *long* waves to them—and the cadenced signals you heard were speech in their communications band?"

"Suppose to their slowed-down eyes that frozen sea were not a rigid mass, but warm, and bright, and splashing in swift waves? Suppose that boy was actually running, not stolidly immobile, as we thought? Suppose the people in that temple were not viewing *one*

picture, but a series of scenes that to their stepped-down pace appeared to move?"

"But, Goran," I protested, "if you're right—"

"On such a planet, all values would be changed. A cold sun would be warm, a thick air thin. We, moving at our speeds unknown to them, would seem impossible creatures. They could not even see us. We could flash before them, if at all, as the palest of flickering flames. Our slowest acts would be invisible. And our touch, Egan, our *touch!*"

"Touch?"

"The terrible touch of thought-transcendent speed. The flaming touch of unendurable friction. Remember how the books seared to black ash? All that we moved, or tried to move, of theirs. Perhaps those things were not old, but were consumed!

"That ball player, Egan! I can't forget how he crumbled in our hands. We moved him—and he turned to a wisp of powder. If he was a living creature, we were his murderers!"

"But that's impossible!" I cried. "Such a race could not be! It's too utterly, too terribly fantastic—"

*From THE NEW YORK TIMES, 9 August 2001:*

**BALLPLAYER VANISHES!**

**Yank Shortstop Disappears**

**Before Astonished Thousands**

*Police Baffled by Mysterious Occurrences*

Most bewildering of a series of baffling incidents reported this afternoon was the sudden, mysterious disappearance before the eyes of more than 50,000 astounded spectators of Yankee shortstop Buck Wilkins from the Stadium infield.

One moment Wilkins was racing to scoop in a grounder off the bat of Red Sox catcher Tom Landon,



the next he had vanished in what one witness hysterically described as "a little puff of flame."

Police, already harassed by complaints concerning the disappearance of many books and documents from scattered sections of the city, and the daring daylight theft of a memorial statue from Central Park, are closely interrogating all witnesses to these strange happenings. Several suspects are under observation, and an early arrest is promised. . . .

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